

BACCANO!

1932 Summer: Man in the Killer

RYOHGO
NARITA



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BACCANO!

1932 Summer: Man in the Killer

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI

DIGRESSION A

DIGRESSION B





"Ah-ha-ha! Long time no see, huh, amigo?! I heard you'd been in a hospital somewhere! Congrats on being discharged! Too bad, though! You would've been a lot happier if you'd died in there, too!"

PROLOGUE

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FINAL CHAPTER

EPILOGUE

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LIFE

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MALICE SMOLDER IN THE RAIN

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DRUGS IN THE ACCOMPLICE

THE SMILE JUNKIE STRIDES CHEERFULLY
BETWEEN THE KILLERS

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD SHARE THE
WORLD



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1932 Summer: Man in the Killer

VOLUME 16

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 16: 1932 SUMMER: MAN IN THE KILLER

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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Digression A

1932 A certain day of a certain month The speakeasy Alveare

“Isaac, Isaac! It’s awful! It says Ice Pick Thompson has struck again!”

The young woman’s voice calling out was far more cheerful than one would expect to hear in a Prohibition-era speakeasy after hours. Although *cheerful* was more a description of the timbre; at the moment, she was fearful and shocked.

In response, the man she’d called Isaac whirled around toward her. “What?! Tell me you’re joking, Miria!”

Both of them were dressed in the sailor suits worn by the British navy. If the speakeasy had been open, people would have assumed they were performers in some sort of skit. However, they were neither actors nor bar staff. No one had any idea why they were dressed this way.

The couple continued their conversation with such an expert sense of timing that it really did sound scripted.

“It’s true! See, it’s right there in the paper!”

“My God... Our fears have been realized...”

The man and woman had opened a newspaper on top of the liquor barrels that stood in the corner of the speakeasy as part of the décor. Their faces looked solemn. Spotting the pair—Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent—a baby-faced young man who was passing by spoke to them.

“...Huh? You two know about Ice Pick Thompson?” Firo Prochainezo asked, frowning.

Isaac and Miria looked at each other.

“Come to think of it, what was Ice Pick Thompson again, Miria?”

“Hmm? I dunno. But the newspaper says it must be terrible.”

“So what was that about fears? You’re panicking when you don’t even know what’s goin’ on?”

Firo rolled his eyes, while Isaac objected vehemently.

“What are you talking about, Firo?! Miria may not know what’s going on, but it’s terrible enough to frighten her! What fear could be greater than that?!”

“Ooh, Isaac, that’s amazing!”

“*How?!*” Firo sighed in even greater exasperation. Trying to have a serious conversation with those two would only wear him out, so he opted to continue the conversation and just throw out the parts that didn’t make sense. “Ice Pick Thompson is a murderer, you know.”

“A murderer! Do... Do you mean he might go around killing people?!”

“He *does* go around killing people. It’s why they call him a murderer,” Firo explained blandly, and Isaac put a hand to his chin, looking grave.

“My God... We were afraid of this, and now it’s happened...”

“I’m scared! What’ll we do, Isaac?! This is awful!”

So they really were makin’ noise about things they don’t know?

In a way, Firo was almost inspired by their approach to life. He decided to hang out by the barrel for a little while and listen to their conversation.

“It’s all right, Miria! A homicidal person only targets humans! So if we disguise ourselves as something that’s *not* human, he won’t come after us!”

“I see! Isaac, you’re incredible!”

“Legends from the Far East say that if you run up a waterfall and draw an eyeball on a wall, you can turn into a dragon! If we hide ourselves by becoming dragons, I’m sure he’ll let us go!”

“Yes, Zhang Sengyou! Beard the dragon!”

Jang... Uh, what?

Firo was confused by whatever language Miria was speaking, but even if he cared enough to ask, he doubted he’d get a real answer. He decided to ignore them.

Still, he couldn’t let all of it go, so he decided to correct them on another point.

“Heck, if you turned into dragons, you could just knock off the killer anyway.”

However, Isaac sent Firo a serious look, then shook his head.

“What are you saying, Firo?! Use your head for a moment. Dragons get slain by that guy Sig...Sig-something! If you turn into a dragon, the humans will come after you!”

“Yes, Fafnir! Komodo dragons! Kaya-no-hime!”

“Sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

This was turning into a crazy mix of legend and reality, and he wasn’t even sure if they’d been serious about the idea of turning into dragons in the first place.

Acknowledging that he wasn’t going to be able to follow the conversation any further, Firo began looking around for Maiza or Ronny. Those two were executives in the Martillo Family, the Camorra syndicate he belonged to, and he was hoping they could help him out.

But the individual he laid eyes on was a small guest who wasn’t directly connected to the organization.

“Fafnir is the dragon defeated by Sigurd in Norse mythology. In Wagner’s opera, the name was Siegfried, not Sigurd, I think. Komodo dragons are large, real lizards; their existence was confirmed about

twenty years ago. I believe Kaya-no-hime is a Japanese goddess who is considered to be the same as Nozuchi, a grass spirit that resembles a snake. Well, Firo? Did you learn something?" With a teasing smile, Firo's rent-free roommate reeled off a whole list of trivia explaining Miria's remarks.

"Learning that stuff won't earn me one red cent. Maybe you should spend your time learning something useful, Czes."

Firo was speaking to a boy who seemed to be obviously younger than he was, but Czes's sigh sounded like an adult's.

"You're right. I'm sorry, Firo."

"...Hey, no apology required."

Czes's response hadn't been what Firo had anticipated.

It really does feel like he's keeping his distance on purpose.

Were Isaac, Miria, and his old acquaintance Maiza the only ones this boy opened up to? On the surface, he smiled around Firo and plenty of other people, too, but Firo couldn't shake the feeling that the expression was somehow false, or that he was trying harder than a child should not to bother them.

Firo felt this way quite a lot, but he'd decided that the issue would probably resolve itself with time. He didn't want to intrude on the boy's privacy.

Meanwhile, a couple who had never considered keeping their distance in their lives carried on as they usually did.

"I wouldn't feel safe turning into a dragon, if they're weaker than humans."

"The anxiety! The suspense!"

"Something stronger than humans... Something humans could never beat... When do humans die...? Well, all humans die eventually... I

know! Time! Humans can't beat time! In other words, we just need to become time itself! If we do that, then the killer won't get us!"

"Amazing, amazing! Isaac, you're an idea man!"

After giving it some earnest thought, the pair had arrived at an idea. But they couldn't actually be serious.

Firo hesitated, thinking it might be about time to rein them in. Before he could, though, Czes sat down at the table closest to them and joined their conversation.

"How are you planning to do that, specifically? Will you strap clocks all over yourselves?" Czes asked with a rather mean-spirited smile, and Isaac and Miria fell to thinking.

"You know, you're right. How *are* we supposed to become time?"

"Yes, that's a tough one! It's one of the seven mysteries of the world!"

"Time... Time is, uh... What is time...? Time is...?"

"Money!"

"I see! Time is money, so money's the best way to beat the killer!"

"Yes, money is time!"

"How are we supposed to become money, though?"

"Another tough one! It's the *Mary Celeste*!"

I'll just let them be.

Shooting a lukewarm look at the couple and their meaningless circular conversation, Firo took a seat at the speakeasy's counter. Picking up the pitcher of water nearby, he grabbed a cup and filled it without asking for permission. The place belonged to his organization, and whether it was closed or open for business, it felt like a second home to all of them.

In that relaxing place, Firo thought about the moniker “Ice Pick Thompson” with vague unease.

A killer, huh? I wonder what he’s after.

What passed through his mind was nothing more than the sensation of distant gossip, and the unpleasant thought of having a murderer in his own neighborhood. Unlike his ordinary neighbors, though, he wasn’t afraid that he or someone close to him might be killed.

His body, and the bodies of virtually everyone closest to him, was a little unique. Even though Firo was aware of this, he still thought about the incidents and what they had to do with him.

Up till now, all the killings have been on Runorata turf, or in Keith’s family’s territory. If one happens on Martillo turf, then it’ll be our problem, too.

A murderer, huh?

Maybe it’s rude to the victims for me to say so, but...

...pretty ironic that we’re up against a murderer when we can never die.

As if to dispel the eerie feeling that lurked in the depths of his mind, Firo swirled the glass he held. The ice in it separated with a familiar *clink* that took the edge off for the young Camorra executive.

Though these events hadn’t directly touched him, they were very close—

—and quietly, a tale of the in-between spaces began.



PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

1932 Summer

What sort of year was 1932 for the United States of America?

In a simple list of events, the two Olympics would probably be at the top. The Lake Placid Olympics had been held in February, and the Los Angeles Olympics began at the end of July.

Between the Winter and Summer Games, the U.S. took a total of 115 medals, and this sweeping advance—a “gold rush,” if you will—had the whole nation cheering on their gold, silver, and bronze winners.

In addition, the aviatrix Amelia Earhart had successfully completed the first solo transatlantic flight by a woman, and this and other social successes had brought great hope to the hearts of the public.

On the other hand...without those sources of hope, the rest of their situation would have been difficult to face.

The Great Depression, which had begun in 1929, had thoroughly tanked the American economy—and during 1932, it would reach new heights.

Over ten million people out of work. Banks closing like falling dominos. Silent factories.

In the midst of a recession that fueled fears of a shift to socialism, the attention of the people was gradually beginning to turn to the law most emblematic of the era: the Prohibition Act.

Under these circumstances, bootleg liquor was manufactured as a matter of course. Naturally, illegal goods weren't taxed. However, if it were to begin circulating legally, with a typical liquor tax placed on it...

Many people had begun to consider the economic effects of that particular move. As a matter of fact, the Blaine Act, which would

mark the repeal of Prohibition, was passed the following year, allowing some brewers to make and sell liquor.

And in between these great, shining triumphs and the enormous shadow cast by the Depression—a small incident played out beneath the notice of most.

It was an uncanny affair, and it would temporarily plunge the city of New York into a panic that had nothing to do with the Depression.

“Ice Pick Thompson.”

That was the name given to a certain individual.

As the word indicates, ice picks are normally driven into ice—but such a sharp tool could be employed for other purposes. Bartenders, who used ice picks as they were meant to be used, and the workers who manufactured those ice picks would most definitely not have approved. The same thing could be said about hatchets or saws, though.

There’s nothing wrong with having hatchets or chain saws at a logging site, and yet...if someone were to, say, prowl around a beach with one, people would consider it a cruel weapon, inspiring not only anxiety but outright terror.

In the places where it belonged—a bar, or the bedroom of someone wealthy—no one would have harbored any doubts about an ice pick. It was outside of those contexts where it became something to be feared.

And indeed, “Ice Pick Thompson” used one for an indefensible purpose that was a devastating insult to ice pick manufacturers and the law.

His ice pick was not a tool, but a murder weapon.



A certain night in August Somewhere in New York

It was raining.

The alleys were veiled by clouds of spray, and the drumming of the falling drops drowned out the sounds of the crowds filtering through the streets.

New York summers are hot, and New York winters are cold. But even in summer, the temperature falls enough after the sun goes down that it's rarely sweltering at night. On a dark night like this one, the rain changed the coolness into an uncomfortable chill for anyone who was out and about.

In the darkness, the curtains of water made it hard to see, stirring unease in people who were walking alone and urging them to get home a little faster. Ordinarily, the normal way to shake this anxiety would have been to stick to the major streets—but for their own reasons, a few of them were running through the alleys.

The rain had come on suddenly, so many of them didn't have umbrellas. As the thunder rumbled, they hurried as if they were fleeing from something.

From the shelter of a meager excuse for an awning by the back door of a closed shop, a lone figure watched the runners out of the corner of his eye. The man was probably around forty. His rain-wet hair was sprinkled with white, and he was glaring sullenly up at the sky.

The darkness was a bit heavier here, away from the streetlights, and between that and the rain, his vision was extremely limited.

*T*sking in annoyance, the man looked up at the clouds, felt through his pockets with obvious irritation, then pulled out a worn book of matches.

He'd been planning to light the cigarette between his lips—but even after several tries, the matches refused to light.

Apparently, the rain he'd been subjected to before he reached shelter had gotten it damp.

"Tch...!"

After grinding the cigarette between his teeth in annoyance, he spat it out on the pavement.

The man crushed the unused cigarette under his foot—

—and when he looked up, he noticed someone out in the rain.

Whoever it was, was standing a little ways ahead of him, seemingly watching him.

In the next moment, the person broke into a run straight toward him.

The man tried to shoo him away, seeing that he had no umbrella and was as wet as a drowned rat.

"Sorry, fella, but there's only room for one under h—"

Before he'd finished speaking, he froze. Instead of stopping in front of him, the running figure had slammed right into him.

In the moment they collided, he briefly thought the other person's body had gone right through his back.

What had provoked that illusion was the pain—a sharp, heavy pain that ran deep through his core.

"Uh...?"

He'd never experienced anything like this before.

As a result, his scream was delayed. For just a moment, his nerves hesitated. They didn't know how to react, rejecting the reason for what he was experiencing.

When the man looked down at his stomach, he finally identified the source of the pain. His rational brain tried to scream, but he couldn't even manage that.

After all, the silver spike had already been yanked out of the man's stomach and sent speeding toward his neck.

The feeling of it piercing his throat was just a little bit unsettling, and with it came a terrible pain in inverse proportion.

As it tore through his throat, it instantly obliterated all surrounding sensation and delayed his realization of one other thing.

The blood flowing from the deep wound was traveling down his airway, into his lungs. It was over.

".....—"

No longer able to scream, the man crumpled to the ground as if the sky itself were coming down to attack him, and he began to struggle, kicking and flailing.

The sight was comical, as if he were drowning in the rain. To the assailant gazing down at him, though, he might have resembled a desperately squirming insect that had been pinned to a board.

Then, as if he intended to pin down all his victim's limbs as well...

...the attacker dropped to one knee and brought the weapon—an ice pick, wet with blood and rain—down.

Over and over

and over and over and over

and over and over and over and over and over

and over and over and over

and over and over and over and over and over

and over and over

and over and over and over and over

and over and over and over and over

and over

andoverandoverandover

andoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandoveran
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The noise of the unfeeling rain canceled out that slight, mechanical sound of destruction.

The sky didn't even look at the atrocious situation on the ground. Indifferent, it just went on raining.

The blood, the smell of death, and even the killer's malice were all washed away without prejudice.

Wsssh wsssh wsssh wsssh

Sst sst

All that was left in the weakening rain was the body of the dead man, riddled with holes from the ice pick. They joined together to form bigger wounds, until the majority of the corpse had been transformed into an appalling mass of mincemeat.

To someone unfamiliar with the true force behind a bullet, it looked as if he'd been tenaciously drilled with a light machine gun—and a gossip-loving news rag gave the enigmatic assailant a name based on the submachine guns that were popular with gangsters.

“Ice Pick Thompson.”

That was the commonly used name of the serial killer who appeared in New York that year and plunged its citizens into terror.

**The
reporter
doesn't
want an
eventful
life**



CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1: The reporter doesn't want an eventful life

New York Wall Street A certain building Third floor

“‘Ice Pick Thompson’? I can’t believe that ridiculous name caught on. Which paper ran it first?”

“DD.”

“The *Daily Days*, huh...? Dinky little outfit, but they know how to run a gossip story.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Last week’s was number four, right? Will he pull even with Jack the Ripper soon?”

“I sure hope not.”

“What do the cops say?”

“No leads.”

In the office of a certain newspaper, around lunchtime, several men were taking a break and chatting about the incidents, surrounded by mountains of documents, photos, and manuscript paper.

That said, it wasn’t actually break time; other journalists were bustling around, grappling with telephones and the stacks of files as if they wouldn’t get lunch until they were done.

Essentially, this was a group of journalists who had an exceptional amount of downtime, but then—

—emerging from farther back in the office, their supervisor tore through that lazy atmosphere.

“You seem to have a lot of time on your hands, gentlemen. ‘Specially if you’ve got time to talk about other people’s stories.” Despite his casual tone, there was a coldness in his words.

The reporters snapped their mouths shut. Then, after a moment’s pause, they tried to cover for themselves.

“W-well, boss, c’mon. What else do you expect us to do? Lester’s in charge of it, and he’s, y’know...”

“Get the lead out and do your own jobs before you start bellyachin’ about somebody else. If you can manage that, maybe I’ll get you a date with that lousy two-bit killer, too.” The chief editor was smiling. He was over fifty, but his build was solid, and he had a seasoned air about him.

However, that peculiar smile went no further than his lips, and the journalists and editorial staff members scrambled to get out of the room.

Sighing wearily, the chief editor looked back into the cluttered office, focusing on one young reporter. He walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Lester? Sure you don’t have some legwork to do?”

Lester flinched at the gravity in his boss’s voice.

He seemed to be in his midtwenties, and his hair was blond. He quietly got his breathing under control, then turned around and glared up at his supervisor.

“...Don’t threaten me, sir. My nerves are already shot after the past few days.”

“Well, I can appreciate that, but...I thought a cautious type like you’d be the best man for the job—”

"I am cautious. That's why I can't pin down the truth of this case." Sighing, the journalist writing about the Ice Pick Thompson affair shook his head.

"An incident like this... Whoever's responsible musta gone around the bend thanks to the Depression. We know the weapon's probably an ice pick or something, and that he's not after money, since he doesn't take their wallets...and that's it. That's all we know! What legwork is there to do?"

"All kinds. Talk to the victims' families, say, or see if there are any links between all the victims."

"I did check into that a little. But if that's all I've got, you won't even turn it into an article, will you?"

"You know that's not my fault. America's picking up all those gold medals, and we can't just write gloomy articles day after day. Then you've got the fellas from the gossip rags publishing their freshly shoveled bunk every day. That's why the gang over at the *Daily Days* got to name the killer."

Smiling quietly, Lester's boss took the empty chair beside him.

"Frankly, with our reader demographic, we'll sell more papers by writing about the results of the Olympics now. All you have to do is sum up any changes in the case after that, then turn them into a serial article. And if this loony gets his elbows checked before then, you'll be able to go to the shoe store in peace."

Lester knew that when his boss said *shoe store*, he meant *speakeasy*.

In this era, even the basements of shoe stores had hidden bars. At present, with the Depression reaching its peak, there was an endless stream of people who couldn't get by on the revenue from their main lines of business and turned to brewing bootleg liquor.

There was one more thing Lester knew.

All the victims had been targeted and killed when they were alone in alleys, on their way to or coming back from a speakeasy.

This had been broadcast in the papers and on the radio as fact, but it hadn't stopped most people from taking the risk anyway.

Lester didn't want to discuss something like that with his boss, so he kept his mouth shut and continued listening.

"And you were the one who said you wanted to go after this killer. Remember? I didn't think you'd volunteer for this kinda story, to be honest, so I was surprised. It's not too late to switch with somebody else if you want to."

"...I'm sorry. I'll keep at it. Please don't take me off the story. I was frustrated I hadn't made any progress—that's all. I won't gripe about it again."

"Nah, gripe all you want. The police haven't had any leads, either, so there's hardly anything to work with." The chief editor folded his arms, gazed at Lester, and made him an offer. "Listen, Lester. I hate to ask you when you're already shuttling between the cops and the alleys, but how would you feel about taking on one more article?"

"....."

"You aren't happy about it, either, right? Carl's always one step ahead of us on the latest gossip about this guy."

"...Don't talk about him, sir."

Carl.

As soon as he heard the name, Lester's face clouded over.

"He's a loser who ditched us for a rinky-dink outfit like the *Daily Days*. Why would I give a damn what he does?"

"Well, he's the one who came up with 'Ice Pick Thompson,' for one thing. Carl Dignis just might end up in the history books."

“.....”

“Besides, he didn’t hightail it outta here after a screwup. If I remember right, his daughter’s sick or something, and that’s why he switched jobs. I’m not clear on all the details myself, but I don’t see any good reason to call him a loser.”

The chief editor was really taking Carl’s side. Disgruntled, Lester began to protest, but the editor spoke over him. Gently but firmly.

“Look, Lester. I’m not saying this is about winning or losing, but setting that aside... You’re not planning to be the underdog here and stay that way, right? Isn’t that why you volunteered for this article about the killer?”

“.....”

Lester fell silent. The chief editor didn’t try to push his opinions any further. He got up, very deliberately, and assigned Lester a new job.

“The theme is all the young fellas hanging around the alleys. You’ve seen ’em, right? There are more—I wouldn’t call ’em actual gangs, but bands of hooligans around lately. They live between the face of this city and its shadow, so what do they think of the Depression? What worries them? That crowd’s going to be shouldering society in a few years, and the economy’s going nowhere fast. What do they think about that? We’ve decided to put together an article about it. For starters, go see who you find here and interview them.”

The chief editor patted Lester on the shoulder, then took a memo out of his jacket.

There were several addresses scribbled on it, apparently places where these “young fellas” could be found.

“They can be a little rowdy, but kids are kids. Don’t overestimate ’em, but don’t underestimate ’em, either.

“At least they’ll be easier to talk to than the killer, right?”



Evening Somewhere in New York

Ha-ha. Jackass.

Lester was walking down a major street, sullen-faced.

Dammit, why did Carl's name come up then?

Remembering the conversation he'd had with his boss a few hours earlier, Lester ground his teeth.

Carl was a journalist who'd been his coworker until a few years back. The other man had been with the paper five years longer than he had, and to Lester, he was a role model and an inspiration.

However, the longer he worked at the job, the more he sensed the clear difference between the two of them—a difference that experience couldn't account for—and it gradually changed his feelings into aversion.

No matter what he did, he couldn't catch up.

To prove himself wrong, Lester threw himself into his work—and was beaten hollow. Everything ended up backfiring on him.

Lester's boss had once told him, *For a reporter, you value your life too much*. When bringing an article home, personal safety took priority over everything else, but Lester wouldn't expose himself to the slightest danger, even if it was to get a scoop.

Of course, journalists weren't a bunch of reckless daredevils. However, Lester did have a marked tendency to be overcautious not just as a reporter, but in his day-to-day life.

Risking their lives for an article, huh? I don't know what goes on in their heads. Our job is to follow the incident. I can't end up a victim myself and let somebody else have my story. What a disgrace that would be.

In this world, your self is all you've got.

If you had ten thousand lives, each of them would have a self, and they'd all be looking out for number one.

...No, maybe Carl wasn't like that.

I hear he was so reckless so he could get the money for his sick daughter... But that doesn't mean anything. He shared his life with a sick family member, that's all. He'd jump right into the legwork, even the dangerous stuff, and make excuses that it was for his wife's sake. Damn him.

Meanwhile, Lester would write the actual articles flawlessly, but he kept turning out piece after piece that stopped just short of getting to the truth of the incident. When he put it all together, he couldn't take that one last step. At the paper, they called him a coward and laughed at him.

Carl had warned him about that, too. It had magnified his envy of the man, and even today, that resentment was still there.

Kids in the back alleys, huh...?

He foisted off another tough job on me.

The note the chief editor had given him was a list of several abandoned factories, speakeasies, deserted churches, and failed hotels.

In addition, there was a single name there, flagged with a note that said *Caution*.

Graham Specter.

...Never heard of him.

He might be notorious among the juvenile delinquents who loitered in the back alleys, but he was still just a thug looking for power. He probably wasn't worth paying much attention to.

Argh, but kids are hard to deal with at the best of times.

Dammit... Is this any time to be chasing a story like this? It probably won't even amount to anything. I have to go after that goddamned killer, or else...

I'm... I'm not a coward. I'm not.

And I'm gonna prove it by beating Carl to the scoop. I'll show them all.

As Lester was walking along, thinking, a needle of cold ran through his arm.

“?”

He looked up, wondering if, just maybe... And then a cold drop of water struck his face. Then the drops grew more forceful—gradually, then violently.

By the time he realized the sky was too dark for the hour, it was already too late. In the blink of an eye, a sudden evening deluge had swept over the city, driving people off the street in moments.

A late rain shower, huh? Ice Pick Thompson might make an appearance.

The corpses were always discovered after an evening rainstorm. One of their distinguishing features was that the rain had washed all the blood away by the time they were found, leaving the wounds even more graphic.

If I'm out here on my own...I guess that makes me a potential victim, too.

That thought sent a shiver down his spine—but he kept going, sticking to the course he set for himself.

He didn't have an umbrella, and as he jogged through dark alleys, the water soaked him through.

He believed there was nothing up ahead, but...

...a little while after he'd set off running, his expectations were abruptly betrayed.

When he turned into a narrow alley, he found himself entirely alone, and as he approached the next corner, he spotted a lone figure.

And then—the reporter who treasured his life met a killer.

CHAPTER 2

The **despairing** boy wants to
step out into the **sky**



CHAPTER 2: The despairing boy wants to step out into the sky

While the reporter was encountering the killer...

Up on a bridge, a boy gave a small sigh.

The Brooklyn Bridge was one of New York's most prominent landmarks. It was over a mile long in total, and for a time, it was said to be the longest bridge in the world.

It had two levels, with a path for pedestrians and bicycles covering the wide car lanes like a roof. Although *cover* wasn't exactly accurate, since the walkway was far narrower than the road, and a framework of iron beams branched away from it on either side.

The bridge itself was suspended by steel wires, and it had long been one of New York's beloved, iconic sights. It even boasted a view of the Statue of Liberty.

On top of that bridge stood a boy who believed the world didn't love him. He had sighed a moment earlier, but in the steady downpour, none of the pedestrians crossing the bridge registered his presence.

After all, the spot where he was standing was a place people normally never *ventured to*.

To get here, he had climbed across the railing, over the top of the iron beams that served as a roof, toward the edge of the bridge—

In short, he was at the edge of the span, holding on to the wires, looking down over the side.

There was solid ground under the bridge until it crossed the river. Even so, it was easily higher than the brick apartment buildings, and the cars that drove past a little ways away seemed like toys.

The boy just gazed down from his perch.

He couldn't have been older than fourteen. There was still something childlike about his features, but he had dark circles under his eyes, and even with a magnificent view right in front of him beyond the curtain of rain, his gaze stayed focused on the ground.

In a word, he was planning to die.

If he jumped from this height, it would end his life. The boy was sure of it.

Over the water, it might have been different, but there was hard ground below him here. The roof of one of the apartment buildings below him might already have been enough, so jumping from here would be an even safer bet... Or so his vague thought process went.

He might not die instantly, but there wasn't much foot traffic down there. The noise of the rain would probably drown out his groans.

That would mean a painful death, but he'd braced himself for that, too.

He'd fling himself into space. That was all.

He'd step off the edge. Nothing more.

He'd let go of the wires behind him. Even that might do it.

What would it feel like, falling into the sky? Up till now, the tallest thing the boy had jumped from had been a tree that grew in his neighborhood. Even then, he'd banged himself up royally and hurt all over. If he jumped from here, he might not have time to feel pain at all.

As that thought crossed the boy's mind, the memory of climbing that tree surfaced along with it, and the blank mask of his face twisted very slightly.

The emotion wasn't sorrow as much as vague frustration.

Possibly because crying would have hurt, the boy bit his lip, toughing it out, and finally began to focus on the ground.

How long have I been standing here? he thought.

It had been quite a few minutes since he'd climbed over the bridge's railing, but nobody had noticed him. Either that, or they hadn't paid much attention. Even after he'd fallen, how many people would spare a glance for his death?

The Depression had led to a constant stream of suicides. And his death wouldn't even be a clear suicide or accident; it was doubtful whether it would even get a mention in the papers.

I'm going to disappear.

Oh, I see. I'm not dying. I'm disappearing.

No one would grieve his death. He had no friends. No family.

For a moment, he thought, *If I'm just disappearing, it doesn't really matter whether I live or die, does it?* But then he decided that was probably a coward's excuse.

On the other hand, suicide didn't seem especially courageous. From another perspective, what he was preparing to do now might have been considered a cowardly attempt to run away.

Well, then it doesn't matter either way.

He'd be dead. There was no point in caring what people thought of him now.

He peered at the ground intently.

Feels like I can see each individual blade of grass down there.

The sensation of becoming one with the ground began to take hold of him. As if the scene below was drawing him in.

And very soon, it would.

All the sounds around him disappeared; he felt utterly alone in his own separate world.

Yes. I'm alone.

I'll finally, truly be alone.

Then, just as he was about to fall to the earth and join it forever—

“Hi there.”

—abruptly, brazenly, a guest appeared in his world of one.

“What are you doing out here? I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I better tell you this since the stakes are so high... Uh, that’s dangerous. Standing there, I mean.”

The voice didn’t so much step into his world as kick down the door.

It sounded unusually close, and at first, the boy thought he might have been hearing things.

However, when he turned to look—he saw that it hadn’t been an illusion.

Right next to him...

There was a man standing just a few feet away on the edge of the bridge, without an umbrella.

“If you fall, you’ll almost definitely die. Can’t say for sure; maybe you’re built like Popeye or Tarzan. But even then, I bet it’ll hurt like the dickens. So, um, I’m not sure what’s the best way to put this...but I think you probably shouldn’t. Don’t you?”

The voice was so carefree that he hadn’t processed the intention at first, but apparently the man was trying to stop him.

When the boy realized this, for a moment his mind went completely blank, but then—he quickly pulled himself together and told the man off.

“S-stay back!”

“Stay back? I was out here first, you know.”

“?!”

The man’s claim rattled the boy considerably.

He was pretty sure he’d been alone when he came out here, but...was it possible he was wrong about the people around him not noticing him? Had he simply not been paying attention to them?

“No, that’s... You’re lying.”

At that, the man gave a breezy smile and nodded. “Yep, you caught me. I actually just got here.”

“.....”

That was just too much, and for a little while, the boy’s mouth opened and shut uselessly.

The man grinned at him. “What’d you think of my joke?” He cocked his head, like a mischievous kid.

“Wh-who are you?”

“Who am I? I’m just a passing... Hmm. What would be a witty answer, under the circumstances? A passing Don Juan, maybe? What do you think?”

The boy eyed the man, unsure whether he should be angry.

He was dressed in the modern style for a young man, and nothing about his outfit was particularly remarkable. The man was probably five or ten years older than the boy, and his face was extremely normal, neither handsome nor unsightly. However, there was one distinctive thing about it.

He was smiling.

He was on the edge of a bridge, same as the boy. One wrong step, and he'd die as well.

Even so, he was smiling.

What...is with this guy?

For a little while, the boy blinked at the terribly abrupt anomaly that had materialized in front of him. But he had to reply somehow. He groped for words, then said the ones that finally came to him.

"...It's not safe over there."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. Well, well," he murmured in a self-deprecating way. Then, without letting that smile slip, his voice took on a slightly more serious edge. "So then what are *you* doing here?"

"....."

"I suppose this could be an extra-special seat with a great view, technically, but I've lived a long time, and from my well of experience, I'd say—you're about to kill yourself. Am I right?"

"...You are." The boy was taken aback, but he answered quietly. *Seriously, what is with this guy?*

Even as a rather curious sensation came over him, the boy kept speaking indifferently. He'd already taken a slight interest in the man, for better or worse, and that might have been what kept him from simply ignoring him and jumping.

"Just so you know, trying to stop me is a waste of time."

"Why?"

"Because I don't plan to change my mind about dying."

Although he hadn't noticed before, the sound of the rain was weaker than it had been a few moments earlier, and they were able to converse with surprising clarity. He decided to go along with the

conversation the man was trying to have; maybe it wouldn't hurt to have one last chat with someone.

But the smiling man's response wasn't quite what the boy had expected.

"I see. Still, that doesn't necessarily make it a waste."

"Huh...?"

"I may not succeed in stopping you, but it would still give me the experience of trying, and it might come in handy the next time I talk to someone who's about to kill themselves. Or—this isn't how I see it, mind—I'd imagine some people might feel a little better about themselves trying to stop someone attempting suicide, even if they fail. For the people who don't take it that way and get depressed, well, it's still life experience. And you know, I don't think you need to worry about whether I'm wasting my time if you're about to die, do you?"

The smiling man was holding the wires behind him and leaning out over the edge, bouncing back and forth. If his hands slipped, he'd plunge headfirst toward the ground before he knew what was happening. What was he thinking?

As the boy gazed at him dubiously, the man abruptly stopped moving.

"That said, I haven't decided whether to try to stop you yet," he remarked briefly.

"Huh...?"

"Oh, no, it's quite simple; I'm just wondering... I won't, uh, ask you *why* you're trying to die, but..."

"'But'?"

What a weird guy. Wouldn't that be the most important question to ask? Not that I want him to ask, so...I guess it doesn't matter.

Just as he had that thought, the man quietly finished his sentence.

“Will dying make you happy?”

“.....”

If someone who’d come to stop him from killing himself had said that, the boy would have scoffed and silently retorted, *That line would never work on someone who’s made up his mind.*

Even so—the boy couldn’t think that.

After all, the smile accompanying the question had been so pure. There was no sarcasm in it or anything similar. It was the innocent expression of a child.

Beneath the question was not an admonition but genuine hope. He might as well have been a young child asking, *Will Santa Claus really come if I’m good?!*

“Tell me, what sort of happiness will it be? Is it the usual? Do you think you’ll go to heaven when you die? No, I suppose that doesn’t follow. Lots of religions are against suicides. Or is it that you just can’t wait to become a perfect void?”

The man kept blabbing away with his irresponsible questions, and the boy finally snapped at him a little.

“Of course not... There’s no way.”

“Huh?”

“Somebody like me could never...die...and end up happy.”

At that, the smiling man nodded once in understanding, then matter-of-factly replied. “Got it. In that case, I *will* try to stop you from dying.”

“I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. Just buzz off, would you?”

"If leaving you alone would make you happy, then I'd gladly do it, but..."

The man still had that smile on his face.

"...Are you some sort of religious missionary?" the boy muttered with disgust. "Or are you on dope?"

"That's incredibly rude to religious people, don't you think?"

"Why would you stop a loser like me from dying?"

"Pity, mostly."

"Wha—?!" The boy glared angrily back at him.

Oh, "pity," huh? So this is just because he feels sorry for me?!

A violent urge welled up within him to at least cuss this guy out thoroughly before he died, but—

—the man crushed that idea. "I know it sounds like I'm preaching, but I think whoever made the roads and parks down below did it to make somebody else smile. Maybe they wanted to make children smile, say, or maybe they wanted to earn money so that they and their families could smile. If you got those all bloody without even a good reason, I'd feel bad for them."

"Huh...?"

When he said pity...he didn't mean for me?

"Plus, what if somebody happens to be down there, and you hit them? If that person gets hurt or killed along with you, and you're dead, who are their surviving relations supposed to get mad at? Although, I doubt you're thinking about anyone left behind anyway."

"....."

Realizing the boy had gone silent, the man tilted his head, looking mystified, though he still wore a grin.

“Huh? What’s the matter? You look dazed.”

“...Shut up.”

“Aha. You thought I was feeling bad for you, didn’t you? Or did you want me to feel more for you than for them?”

“...—!”

He’d hit the nail on the head.

The man’s remark had been far too accurate, and the fact that he’d thought such a foolish, embarrassing thing plunged the boy into self-loathing as rage bubbled up.

“You goddamn... What the hell is wrong with you?! Why...?! Screw you! I hope you fall!” the boy screamed with tears in his eyes.

The man’s smile softened, growing even happier. “There, now you’re talking like a kid.” Looking back at the scene below, he went on in a practical way. “Well, I don’t think it’s a good idea to keep this from you... You probably haven’t jumped off anything this high before, but it hurts. From this distance, I don’t think you’d manage to pass out before you hit the ground. If you go headfirst, you should die on impact, but it’s not easy to change position in midair. They say you’d naturally fall headfirst anyway ’cause of the weight of your brain, but I dunno if that’s true.”

What’s this guy trying to do here? Does he want to stop me or not?



Dammit, he's getting in the way. Because of a guy like this, a guy like him, I almost don't...

His concentration broken, the boy's state of mind was returning to normal, and when he looked down again, a thrill of tension ran through him from head to toe.

Up until a moment ago, he thought he'd been ready to die. His heart had already shut down, and he'd felt dead already.

But now, when he looked at the ground below during this conversation—

I'm scared.

His knees went weak.

The absent fear of death returned, rushing from his belly up his spine.

To distract himself from that fear, the boy put on a bold front for the man next to him.

"It's not like you've ever jumped, either. How do you even know this stuff?"

He did think it was a rude thing to say to an adult, but he couldn't seem to care about that anymore. He just wanted to thrash this guy, whoever he was.

His question had been more sarcastic than anything, but—

"I have, too," the man replied blandly. "I've done it a few times, and seriously, I wouldn't recommend it. I mean, I'm used to it by now, but still."

"Mister...what are you even talking about?"

This joke had gone way too far.

Anger was about to blaze up in the boy's heart again, but—

“I know! I’ll give a little test jump right now, so go ahead and watch! You can see how nasty it gets firsthand; it won’t be too late to jump after that... Okay, there’s nobody down there right now.”

“Huh?” By the time he asked that question—it was already too late.

“Hiyah!”

With a goofy-sounding yell, the man let go of the wires and plummeted off the bridge.

“Wha—...?”

Light as a competitive diver, with no hesitation—
—and headfirst.

The fall took longer than the boy had imagined.

And as that vague impression formed in his mind, the man flew apart in a burst of red fireworks below.



Aaah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Why, why?!

I didn’t mean to... I didn’t mean that!

The boy hastily scrambled back to the walkway, then dashed all the way to the bridge’s entrance.

Then, taking a significantly longer route than his companion had taken, he ran hell-for-leather to the spot where the man had fallen.

After that blood splatter, he couldn’t possibly still be alive. He couldn’t be, but—the boy kept running anyway.

No, no.

He d... He died, he—he died because of me?

Panting for breath, he reached his destination.

A deserted alley. All he could see there was the man's corpse, faceup.

"No... *No.*"

With a murmur like a quiet scream, the boy ran up to the corpse—and realized the blood he'd seen splash up the walls wasn't there now. Probably washed away by the rain.

The boy checked the man's body. His arms were still attached, and his eyeballs and brain fluid were still where they belonged. With a flicker of hope, he shook the man.

He was clinging to a possibility that even he thought was ridiculous: the idea that the man might still be alive.

Violent shaking could have the opposite effect on an injured man, but the boy couldn't think of anything else to do. He kept trying to wake up the tidy corpse.

"Pull yourse... Pull yourself together! Y-you can't! Don't die... You can't die!"

And then—

—the man's eyes blinked open. He looked at the boy, wearing the same smile as a moment ago.

"Hi there."

"Waugh?!"

It was just too much—the boy stiffened in shock. Slowly, the man sat up, cracking his neck audibly.

"You're a good kid, aren't you? We only just met, and I made you mad. But you still put off your own death and came to help me."

"Ah...aaaaah!"

“Besides, if you seriously wanted to die, you wouldn’t have bothered to spend that much time talking to me. Yeah, I really do think you should stay alive for a while yet.”

What sort of magic trick had he used?

The boy was too stunned to speak.

Still smiling, the man slowly extended a hand to him in an attempt to set the boy at ease.

“I’m Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross.

“I’m just a smidge immortal. Pleased to meetcha!”



The wrecker twirls his weapon
with **shock and delight**

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3: The wrecker twirls his weapon with shock and delight

Night A speakeasy somewhere in New York

The underground bar was rather cramped, and at a table in the corner beneath the electric lightbulbs, a young guy at a table in the corner was talking.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story.”

His voice was clear as a bell and full of despair.

“I’m having a great night. This glass of milk is chilled to perfection, and it coats my mouth and throat and stomach with a blanket of white... Just like drifting snow.” He seemed slightly under twenty, and he sighed mournfully again. “It’s a great night. It really is... So why do I have to tell a sad story? That’s the saddest, awfulest thing about all this. I bet somebody’s gonna say I should just shut up then, but sadly, I can’t. I can’t contain all this sadness inside myself. I want to confide it in someone, at least, so I can have friends who know my sadness. I’d imagine that’s an extremely natural thing to do. After all, humans are so very, very, very weak.”

The young man’s outfit was either perfect for this speakeasy, which was located under a factory, or wildly inappropriate. The blue coveralls did make him look like a factory worker, but such a bright blue would never have been used for ordinary work clothes. If he walked around town dressed like that, he’d be as conspicuous as you could get.

The strangest part wasn’t the color, but the object the man was fiddling with in his free hand while he drank his milk.

It was an adjustable wrench, the sort used to tighten nuts. From that description, one might assume it was a normal thing for a man in coveralls to have—but it had three distinctive features.

The first was its size.

The man certainly didn't have a large build, and the wrench was clearly longer than a child's arm. It felt more accurate to call it a medieval warrior's mace than a work tool.

The second was the incongruity of toying with it while drinking milk in an illegal bar.

And the final thing was—

—the fact that the surface of that wrench was corroded by the red blood and rust caked onto it.

At first glance, the man seemed slender and mild-mannered. His muscles were unexpectedly solid, but shiny blond hair hung over his face, and the half-open, sleepy eyes behind it were striking.

If all you saw was his lustrous hair and his pale skin, he might have come across as a handsome young man, but the color in his eyes was incredibly dull and unsettling.

That said—the people who were making eye contact right then were already used to that.

Across from the man in coveralls was another young man, the one among the group who had been the most engaged in the conversation. Still, he answered rather absently as he drank his orange juice.

“Yeah, you said it. Humans are weak. Getting killed and dying—it doesn't get weaker than that.”

“Right... Humans are hopelessly frail. Not even omnipotent, godlike power could shut down the sadness in our hearts... Then what are

we supposed to do? Is... Is that... Is that all we can do? Drown in our ocean of tears and die?”

The man’s rambling seemed liable to depress his listeners, and the friends around him had resigned themselves to their fate.

Just then, an interloper appeared at their table.

“Shaddup, you little punks! Rug rats like you shouldn’t even be in here!”

A big drunk man came up to the young guy’s group, brandishing a liquor bottle he’d grabbed.

He slammed the empty bottle into the table hard enough to shatter it, sending fragments every which way.

The group fell silent.

“Oh, come on. What, you scared of a li’l bottle? I didn’t come here to listen to you yappin’ about God knows what. You gonna pay me back for ruinin’ my evening? Huh?”

The reaction of the people around him emboldened the complainer, who was giving them particular grief for the crime of “being noisy.”

True, the topic hadn’t been a pleasant one to overhear, but the man in the coveralls had been speaking low enough to blend into the surrounding hum of conversation.

This interloper had gone to the trouble of coming over to gripe about it. A leer spread across his liquor-flushed face.

“If you’ve got the dough for a drink here, I’m sure you’ve got enough to make it worth my—”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

Suddenly, the man had realized his knees had buckled.

“Uh, wha...?”

Wondering what had happened, the big man looked at his feet—and saw that his ankle was turned in a peculiar direction. He also noticed that the jaws of an enormous wrench were *clamped* around it.

“Shi— Huh?”

His liquor-dulled nerves gradually began to transmit pain up from his ankle. At the same moment, the sensation was converted into terror, and the man instantly sobered up.

“Sadness... Somebody just painted over my sadness with more sadness, so what am I supposed to do? On a great night like this, a drunk mugger got all up in my face and wrecked the whole rotten thing? What do I do now? Is a great night so fragile that this is all it takes to break it? ...Well? Wait, wait, nights aren’t ‘great’ or ‘awful’ at all; it’s only weak human senses that decide they are, so of course they’re weak... Oh... How can this be? My weakness was so weak it even weakened this terrific weak night! In other words! I sullied this night! Dammit...

DammitdammitdammitdammmiiiiiaaAAAAaaaaAAAAAH!”

The words of the young guy in the coveralls slowly filtered into the man’s brain, quietly and cruelly.

“D-don’t...”

The man had caught on. He’d messed with someone he really should not have messed with, and now that someone was returning the favor.

The young men around them hadn’t gone quiet because they were afraid of *him*.

They’d known what was about to happen.

The man in the coveralls began whirling the wrench around and around.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaAAAAAAAH!”

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUUUURRGH!”

Simultaneous screams of irritation and terror echoed in the speakeasy.



A few minutes later

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Carl; Carl Dignis from the *Daily Days*.”

The man still looked young, but he had a seasoned atmosphere. He carried himself with dignity, yet he blended in well with the people around him. He seemed like what you’d get if you took a courteous, elite banker and added an element of folksy charm.

“Did, uh... Did something happen?”

The man who’d introduced himself as “Carl” glanced at the floor a short distance away.

A large man lay there, groaning. All the joints in his arms and legs had been dislocated, and he’d collapsed as bonelessly as a four-legged octopus.

The ordinary-looking young man who was sitting in front of the wrench-twirling one got to his feet and reached out for a handshake.

“Hello, I’m Shaft. I took your call. The fella moaning on the ground there managed to bump every joint he’s got on the corner of a table; don’t worry about him.”

“I see.” It wasn’t clear whether Carl was actually convinced or not, but he didn’t seem too concerned. “May I?” he asked, before sitting down in the chair next to him.

“Sure, go ahead... So what does a DD reporter want to talk to us about?”

“Well, you see...”

Just as he was about to explain, the man in the coveralls abruptly joined the conversation.

“Oh... That’s fun! I’m in a phenomenally good mood today, so let me tell you a fun story!”

“Huh?”

“Never thought that just dismantling all the joints of a mere big guy by myself would cheer me up this much! I’m convinced! Humans are strong! The ocean of sadness rises endlessly, but we have the strength to swim through it to the other side. We have the wisdom and courage to build a boat and get over it... Isn’t that right?”

“Mr. Graham, I wouldn’t say wisdom is part of your— Gwuff!” Taking a light wrench thrust to the gut, Shaft groaned quietly. “Mr. Graham, seriously, gimme a break...! Actually, what was that ‘sad story’ you were gonna tell a minute ago? It ended before you got to the actual story.”

“Oh, the jerky snacks I’d ordered to go with my milk hadn’t shown up yet.”

“I sincerely could not care less about that...!”

As he watched a typical conversation between these two, Carl the journalist quietly narrowed his eyes, observing the man in the coveralls.

Graham Specter.

He was something of a leader of one of New York’s many groups of delinquents. Rumor had it he was a tricky customer. Rumor also had it that he was about as unusual as Tick Jefferson, the Gandor Family torture specialist.

In addition, Carl had gathered that if you managed to piss him off, you didn’t get away unscathed. From the groans of the big man next to him—and his joints, which had been methodically bent in their

opposite directions—he understood that that apparently wasn't just a rumor.

Even so—

Or rather, because this was so, Carl Dignis was speaking to them.

He wanted to convey information to them, as well as glean it from them.

“Graham...wasn't it?”

“Yeah. And you're a *Daily Days* newshound, right? What do you want to ask us about? If it's a fun story, we'll talk as long as you want! Just being able to tell fun stories is fun all by itself, ain't it?! And by that logic, aren't people perpetual motion machines that can stay entertained forever?! Whoa... I'm getting all worked up now.”

After Graham rambled on excitedly, the journalist took on a certain sort of determination in his expression. “Before we get started, there's some information I need to pass on to you.”

“?”

The young men looked at him, wondering what was up.

The journalist quietly drew a breath—then spoke very clearly so that each word landed like a solid hit. “You're familiar with Ice Pick Thompson, aren't you?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll give it to you straight... The police suspect you all.”

Instantly, the air around them froze.

Just as Carl was about to explain the particulars, he heard the *thwap* of the wrench striking the palm of a hand.

“I see.”

The once-excited man narrowed his eyes.

Neither confirming nor denying the suspicion, he made a single remark. Something that was, for him, a solid fact:

“This just got fun.”



* * *

The next day, a newspaper ran the story—a new Ice Pick Thompson incident—before any other information outlet could.

On top of that, the article was so graphic it seemed as if its writer had actually been on the scene. It sent a shock through the city—and a sensation.

One might have assumed it was yet another scoop from the *Daily Days*, but as a matter of fact, it came from a different major paper.

This paper was a prominent tabloid that had, until now, printed full-page coverage of the results of the Olympics, which was why the incident was impressed on the minds of the public even more strongly.

The article had been written by Lester, a young reporter, and it made him a household name overnight.

By rights, just like the one who'd coined the name "Ice Pick Thompson," this journalist might have met Graham Specter—but instead, he'd encountered a twisted murderer.

And with that incident as the trigger—

—the shadows of the town began twisting in the darkness.

Interlude

He appeared with the rain showers.

He crept closer, under cover of the noise of the downpour...

...and inflicted a rain of needles on human bodies.

Wsssh-wsssh, skash-skash, wsssh-wsssh, skash-skash.

He appeared so that he could kill.

The first victim ran a small speakeasy.

The second victim owned a real estate office.

The third victim was an active police officer.

The fourth victim operated a rental warehouse.

And the fifth victim was a streetwalker who stood in back alleys,
night after night.

The last victim was the first woman, and that fact sent a tremendous
shock through the city.

Just because a lone prostitute had become a victim, some
irresponsible people started shouting about the similarity to Jack the
Ripper. Theories ranging from the idea that the killer was a Jack the
Ripper fanatic to Jack the Ripper himself somehow were flying every
which way.

The police worked hard, attempting to stamp out the scuttlebutt, but
the rain washed away most of the evidence.

Because the only eyewitness testimony came from a reporter, they
weren't even sure if he'd truly seen anything or not.

Between the light of Olympic glory and the gritty darkness of the
Depression, a vicious criminal sent a ripple through American gossip.

Ice Pick Thompson.

He hadn't sent calling cards or challenges to the police, like Jack the Ripper or the future Zodiac Killer.

However, a murderer who was known by that name did exist, inspiring a variety of criminal profiles in the minds of the public.

Even as people feared him—or her—the story quietly permeated the world, a jolt to help distract them from the Depression.

There were no signs that the criminal would be captured. Nothing hinted that the violence would stop.

And this summer—

—the boy who should have died met an immortal monster—

—and the reporter who feared death met a killer.

ignorant boy a warning



The bookstore owner gives the

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4: The bookstore owner gives the ignorant boy a warning

Afternoon A certain used bookstore in New York

“Ice Pick Thompson Strikes Again! Culprit a Grotesque Long-Armed Phantom?”

With the hysterical newspaper as his pillow, the shop’s proprietor was dozing the lazy afternoon away.

The old bookstore sat between faded apartment buildings, and the man was currently behind the counter and slumped over his desk. He hadn’t even taken his glasses off, and a tiny trickle of drool from his mouth was creating a little stain on the newspaper.

“Fngha...” When he heard the shop’s door open, he slowly opened his eyes. “Oh dear, mustn’t do that...!”

Flustered, the elderly man shook his head, trying to wake himself up.

The customer who’d just come in was a boy no older than fourteen.

“You should be more careful, mister.”

“Hmm...? Oh, it’s you, Mark. Sorry about that. I just can’t seem to win against the sandman lately... No telling what could happen while I’m asleep, so I’m as careful as I can be... Never mind that, what about you? Are you all right?” The man examined Mark’s face.

There were big dark circles under the boy’s eyes, and his color wasn’t good. His expression, too, was rather lifeless, as if he hadn’t slept in several days.

“What’s the matter?” the proprietor asked with worry. “Not feeling so great?”

“No, I’m okay...” The boy smiled, but even his smile seemed a little weak.

The proprietor was unconvinced, but Mark carried on regardless. Instead, he looked at the bookshelves. Despite his obviously poor health, he was studying the shelves quite seriously.

It wasn't clear what the boy was looking for; his gaze traveled between medical books and volumes of folklore—and books filled with pulp occult stories.

If he was trying to find something, the route he was traveling made it difficult to guess. But the boy's eyes were extremely focused.

The proprietor took off his glasses, rubbed the sleepers out of the corners of his eyes, then asked with some confusion, "Mark... What in the world are you looking for?"

"....."

The boy was silent for a little while, then turned to the proprietor, looking troubled. "Hey... Um, don't think I've lost it, okay? There's a story I'd like to tell you, but it may not make sense."

"C'mon, don't be so stiff. You've been coming here for ten years or so. If there's something you want to discuss, sure, I'll help you out. To be honest, ever since... Well, you've looked pretty down for a while now, so I've been wishing there was something I could do for you."

The elderly proprietor directed a kind smile at him, but the boy looked as troubled as ever.

"So, uh...", he timidly began. "I really do want you to assume this is all nonsense."

"Sure. That's fine."

"Do you think it's possible for somebody who was obviously fatally wounded...to come back to life right in front of you?"

The moment he asked—the proprietor’s expression changed. He didn’t seem worried about the boy’s mental state, or suspicious of a lie.

“Wh-what are you talking about, Mark?! Don’t tell me— Did you see something?!”

“Huh?”

“I’m telling you this for your own good. No matter what you saw around here...forget about it! Listen to me. Whatever you do, don’t spread that story around! Do you hear me?! Don’t tell a soul!”

The proprietor had raised his voice suddenly, and the boy was taken aback. The man wasn’t angry, though. He was seriously worried, and when the boy realized that, his confusion deepened.

“What do you mean?! Mister, do you know something?!”

“N-no! Nothing, I know nothing! Look, if you only get hauled off to the hospital, you should consider yourself lucky! You don’t wanna know what happens if you tell everybody what you just said! You’ll get yourself killed, boy!”

After that, the only thing the man would say was “Forget about it, do you hear?!” over and over, and the boy ended up leaving the bookshop without any new clues.

“Forget about it,” huh? Remembering what the proprietor had told him, he quietly closed his eyes. *Boy, do I wish I could!*

He screamed the words silently, and when he opened his eyes—

“Hi there.”

—the man he had to forget was standing right in front of him.

“So your name is Mark? I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but the guy who ran that shop was too loud to miss.”

“.....”

There was a smile right in front of him.

It was a strong, kind expression that denied the existence of misfortune in the world at all.

The smile seemed to insist the boy would be forgiven no matter how evil he was, and when he saw it—

“...!”

—with terror on his face, he wordlessly turned tail and bolted.



An alley somewhere in New York

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story.”

As a cool wind blew through the shade, the young man who’d spoken let his gaze fall to the ground at his feet.

It was an unnervingly clear summer day in New York. The sun was evaporating the moisture that was left on the streets until the air was hot and humid, as if it were trying to erase all traces of the previous evening’s heavy rain.

In an attempt to avoid that glaring sunlight, several youngsters were hanging out in a back alley a short distance from Broadway.

However, the central figure of the group, a young man in blue coveralls—Graham Specter—had launched into a gloomy rant that was turning the cool shade into unpleasant darkness.

“Why are we here? Right, because it’s hot. When we avoided that openly hostile sunlight, where did we end up? Right here in the shade.”

“Uh-huh...”

It wasn't clear whether his companions were listening to him. They were leaning idly against the wall, or pressing their cheeks against its cool bricks. Except for one of them, who was dutifully responding.

That young confidant, who'd been nicknamed Shaft by the others, was truly the axis on which his idling energy spun. But—

"In short...we turned our back on the sunlight and ran in here! What a sad, sad story! I bet the sun had no intention of picking a fight with us! The sun is huge; compared to it, we're just space dust! The sun isn't petty enough to pick a fight with dust, or that's what I want to believe! And yet! And yet! We ran! From what? From the sun! We ran from somebody who didn't even want to hurt us! If it wasn't for the sun, we'd be dead!"

"Yes, yes, very true."

"Dammit! Who do we think we are? Who the hell do we humans think we are?! The sun can become our enemy or our ally without even knowing it... If it was just a little hotter, mankind would be destroyed! If it was colder, we'd be destroyed then, too! We're mere puppets in the sun's hands... So the sun is the mastermind behind humanity! What a sad, sad story. The mastermind has brazenly stepped out from behind the curtain, and yet I can't do a thing—What the hell can I vent this sadness on?!"

"Why not on your own brain?"

A trickle of sweat ran down Shaft's cheek—perhaps it was the heat, or perhaps it was fear.

"....."

"Geez Louise. Don't break even worse than you usually do just because it's hot, all right, Mr. Graham? Think of us. We're busy getting away from the heat, too, and we don't have that kind of free time. Simmer down, give the sun your unconditional surrender, and lie on the ground over there or something."

“.....”

“Huh? Hey, Mr. Graham, what’s the matter? Why are you brandishing your wrench like that?”

Graham’s beloved giant wrench was as big as a child’s leg. As he raised it overhead, Graham wore a quiet smile reminiscent of the Buddha statues of the Far East.

“Useful... Yes, let me tell you a useful story.”

“Uh, wait.”

“A way to get cool... If you want to get the heat out of your body, what about reducing the amount of blood you’ve got?”

“Erm, Mr. Graham? Mr. Graham? That’s not a real solutio—”

Whether or not he could hear what Shaft was saying, Graham grabbed his friend’s neck with his free left hand and pushed him up against the wall.

“Whoa! Wai—! That ain’t—! That ain’t funny, Mr. Graham!”

“And rest easy. In my experience—”

Like a spring wound up to the breaking point, Graham’s wrench rose until it was behind his back and then stopped dead.

“—all corpses are cold.”

“Well, yeah, if their temperature is lower than your body temperature, of course they feel cold!”

Even under the circumstances, Shaft made a levelheaded retort, but it was so levelheaded that it fell flat. Watching him, Graham gave an angelic smile, and then—

“Yeah, I know.” The smile abruptly vanished, and his face became a cruel mask. “So?”

“Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wait-wait-wait-wait, please, wait, Mr. Gra-Gra-Gra-Gra-Gra-Graaaaaaah?!”

As Shaft screamed, the tightly wound spring of Graham’s right arm was released—

—and the enormous rusty wrench sent a roar echoing through the alley.

“Aah...a-ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...”

Shaft was twitching, his eyes rolled back in his head.

The wrench had buried itself in the wall right beside his face. Yanking it free, Graham breezily asked, “All cooled down now?”

The wrench had *punched* into a brick wall.

It was clearly outside the bounds of common sense, but although the young men around him broke out in a collective cold sweat, they didn’t seem all that surprised. This was apparently a typical exchange for the pair.

Shaft’s knees were quaking, and his mind appeared to be somewhere else. Ignoring him, Graham stretched his arm out and began spinning and twirling the wrench in the shade.

He was still as high-energy as ever, but the polarity of his emotions had been completely reversed.

“Oh, this is fun! Let me tell you a fun story! And I’m gonna whether you like it or not! I’ll tell a fun story if I have to do it by force! From now on, it’s all gonna be fun time! Hot damn, I’m getting all wound up. I bet my brother Ladd feels like this before he heads out to kill somebody!”

Still spinning, he began twirling the wrench like a baton, turning it into a dangerous, unapproachable object and forcing everyone around him to take a step back.

...Both physically and mentally.

“That’s right, my brother Ladd! Even after he lost an arm and the cops hauled him off, he just doesn’t let us get bored! Right?!”

“Well, maybe he *should*!” Shaft had made a speedy recovery, and now he was glaring at the whirlwind weapon coldly. “I mean, he’s the reason they think we’re Ice Pick Thompson.”

“Indeed! And that’s exactly what I wanted to talk about today!”

Their leader’s sleepy eyes sparkled.

As he looked at him, Shaft gave a weary, heartfelt sigh. “Aaaaaaah, why couldn’t we have gotten here without knockin’ me out?”

“It’s your own fault. This stuff wouldn’t happen if you quit bellyaching. Yes... The one to blame is you, Shaft! Either that, or it’s me! I’m the violent one! The sun’s completely blameless!”

“You’re back on that again?!”

“The sun just sits there, neither good nor bad. It doesn’t have a heart, either! It’s just *there*, and yet it gives us everything! Including pain sometimes! The sun is truly incredible; no wonder it gets treated like a god all over the world! How fun is that?! And this god has an overwhelming attack: sunlight! And we’ve been seeking shade in an attempt to fight back... Has our adventure only just begun?!”

“Hell if I know,” Shaft answered listlessly. He sighed again, trying to steer the conversation back in its original direction.

“Anyway, you heard what that reporter said yesterday, right? Never mind this stuff—let’s just behave until they catch the killer.”



The day before In a certain speakeasy

“W-wait, what do you mean, we’re under suspicion?”

Journalist Carl Dignis had contacted Graham's group, saying he wanted to ask them about something, and the first thing he'd told them was more than enough to leave everyone involved wide awake and sober: *They suspect you of being the killer.*

The reporter had dropped that bombshell on them, and a startled Shaft had responded in disarray.

Since the reporter had said he wanted to talk to Graham, the young men had figured he was writing an article about delinquents like them, and with the exception of Graham, they all looked completely confused.

Meanwhile, Graham almost appeared to be enjoying himself as he was toying with his wrench.

After stealing a glance at the young man in the coveralls, the journalist from the *Daily Days* began to speak. He lowered his voice so that only their group could hear him.

"I know about you, Graham Specter. You were originally a wrecker employed at a Chicago auto manufacturer. Breaking things down has been an interest of yours since you were a boy, and you've demolished more than three thousand cars with your favorite wrench. You've currently relocated to New York and are running a group of hooligans, young people who aren't quite mafia... Does that sound about right?"

As the man gave the rundown on Graham's background, the others with him watched him suspiciously. Graham himself looked even more entertained, and the wrench danced in his hands.

"Hoh-hoh... This is fun. I don't even have to introduce myself. Convenient!"

However—

"You're acquainted with a man named Ladd Russo, correct?"

“.....”

Smack.

With a rather louder sound than before, Graham’s wrench stopped.

“When your group... Or rather, when you, Graham, were in Chicago, you often accompanied him.”

“*Accompanied* ain’t accurate. I was just nuts about how strong he was.”

“What about the rumor that he was the Russo Family’s top hitman?”

“Rumors are rumors.” Graham settled himself more deeply into his chair, placed both his hands and the wrench on his lap, and snickered a little. “My brother Ladd ain’t a hitman; he’s a murderer. Don’t assume he’s a cheapskate who’d take folks’ lives for money. He kills for the love of the game. He’s genuine, bona fide scum of the earth.”

“I give up... This guy’s done for...”

Ignoring Shaft, who’d buried his face in his hands, Graham went on with confidence.

“All that aside—he’s strong. Whether you’re a murderer or a hero, strength is enough to give you status. And in this world, it doesn’t matter if you’re a murderer or the scum of the earth. As long as you’ve got that strength, you’ll always find some poor bastard low enough to look up to you! Who’s that? It’s me! ...Damn, this is getting fun. I’m the lowest? The lowest— That’s incredible. You can look up all you want! If there’s nobody below you, you don’t have to worry about anybody passing you up! Or about sinking to even greater depths... What the hell is God thinking?! Why’s he making things more fun for me than they already are?!”

“I’d imagine he’s lookin’ for the first chance to forsake you,” Shaft replied calmly, while Graham began spinning his wrench cheerfully—

—until he abruptly stopped, turning to the reporter with a somewhat serious expression.

“But anyway, let’s say nobody cares about that ‘rumor.’ Why does that make us killers?”

“At first, the police assumed it was revenge of some sort. The corpse was stabbed so many times with that ice pick—it’s not the sort of thing a sane person would do.”

“Oho...”

“But when the second and third victims turned up, there was nothing that linked the victims to each other, and the police began suspecting a serial killer... And they developed a theory that multiple people were involved. That’s how back-alley gangs like you ended up on the list of suspects. You have no alibis, and as long as it’s raining, there’s not enough people on the streets to witness you.”

As he calmly went on, the journalist sipped the black tea that had been brought to their table.

“Well, everything up till this point would only make you one of countless suspects, but the fourth victim is a little unique.”

“Unique how? Didn’t the papers say he ran a rental warehouse?”

“On paper, yes. You see, the current official stance of the U.S. on the mafia is that no such organization exists,” the journalist frankly explained.

Graham smirked. “So victim number four was mafia?”

“He was a Gandor.”

“.....”

“I’m sure you’ve heard of them.” The journalist’s voice was calm.

The young delinquents glanced at one another, and Graham shook his head with a terse smile. "...That's not a name I really want to hear at the moment. But this is getting even more fun now."

"It's not fun at all," Shaft objected, and the journalist took that as his cue to continue.

"Right. You've tangled with the Gandor Family several times, on their turf. The victim seems to have been a new recruit, but the police view you as persons of interest," Carl explained casually.

"No!" Shaft protested, his eyes round. "I mean— No! That's not fair! Why would they suspect us just because of the fourth one?!"

"The first victim ran a speakeasy, and he'd recently relocated it onto Gandor turf."

"....."

"The second was a Realtor, and lately he'd begun dealing with the Gandors due to trouble over land sales. The third was a police officer; the Gandors' territory was his beat. He may also have been taking bribes of some sort."

As the man listed more context around each victim, Shaft's face paled visibly. The young delinquents around him were also listening intently to what the journalist said, looking bewildered.

"At first, they also thought it might be the Runoratas, who'd caused trouble for them half a year ago, or the Martillos, who almost went to war with them in the past. But even if it was a threat, there was no need to go to the trouble of stabbing them with an ice pick. If a Runorata wants to fill a guy full of daylight, he'll use a real tommy. The Martillos are experts in ending a war fast, so they would have gone directly for the executives."

“I see. Makes sense.” Graham had begun spinning his wrench again, and he gritted his teeth in a tense smile. He’d already predicted the rest of the story and was just dying to compare answers.

As Graham’s eyes shone like a child’s, the reporter took a small breath. Then, smiling back wryly, he told him the bottom line.

“At that point, the police began to focus on anyone who really caught their eye. I hear they don’t have any evidence, so they haven’t charged anyone for the crime yet, but... The Bureau of Investigation has sent out a notice to the effect that they’re zeroing in on the sworn brother of the murderer Ladd Russo, a man with similar eye-catching proclivities—

“In other words, you.”

Silence.

A cold, heavy air bore down on the table and the boys around it. The hubbub at the other side of the speakeasy seemed to go straight through them.

“...I’ve got a question,” Graham said.

At the unusual gravity in his voice, Shaft and his other friends shot him startled looks.

“Why are you telling us about this?”

There was a pause.

In that brief moment, the journalist picked up on what Graham was getting at, and he took a sip of his tea before he spoke. “Because I know you aren’t the culprit.”

“Oh yeah? What makes you so sure?”

“As far as I’m concerned, the *Daily Days*’ information network is rock-solid. You’re a dangerous character, but you’re no murderer.”

“You mean I haven’t been before? Maybe I got possessed by the ghost of Ladd’s left arm last month.”

He leaned in, challenging him, and poked the other man’s throat with the end of his wrench.

His eyes glittered behind his bangs, as if he really was repressing a murderous urge.

But with a chagrined smile, the journalist leaned away and ordered a second cup of tea from the owner of the speakeasy. “Beg pardon. I’m very particular about my tea, you see. This place is excellent. The liquor may be their bread and butter, but they use quality leaves.”

“Yeah, that’s because we gave ’em hell about it earlier. All the nonalcoholic stuff at this joint is top-drawer.”

“You have my gratitude... Oh, yes. Why I don’t suspect you.”

The journalist leaned toward Graham again, pushing the wrench away with his fingers—

—and lowered his voice.

“It’s because I have an idea as to who the culprit really is.”



The next day Noon In a certain alley

“So who do you figure the real killer is anyway?”

Remembering the previous evening, Shaft shrugged.

Graham was still spinning. “No clue!” he cried. “When we told him to spill it, he said ‘If I did, I’d be working as an information broker, not a reporter’! What a fun guy! If that’s how he wants to play it, we’ll just have to knock over the *Daily Days* and steal all their dirt!”

“What would we use stolen info for?” Shaft was exasperated, but he hadn’t given up entirely on the conversation.

Graham was still spinning and looking every which way. "...Well, you know. Say...which horse wins the next race! Hot damn, if we knew that, we'd be rich! We're gonna need seed money... How much do you have on you, Shaft?"

"Enough to take you to a doctor, Mr. Graham. If we went to Dr. Fred, I think we'd even get a discount."

"I see... A doctor, huh? Doctors are good. Professionals who demolish human bodies with surgery. Anyway, I'm getting dizzy. Couldn't tell you why. Maybe I'm coming down with a cold."

Graham kept on spinning, and once again, Shaft buried his face in his hands and groaned.

"Aaaaaaah, I give up. I knew it: He's done for."

Graham had spun around so many times that now he lay sprawled on the ground. His followers stood around him, but they stayed in the cool shade.

At the center of this strange picture, their fallen leader vented his emotions, which had turned negative again.

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story... I can usually do three thousand times easy, but today, my head started spinning after a measly two thousand three hundred and seventeen times."

"You don't suppose that's because you're stupid, huh, Mr. Graham?"

Shaft wasn't even trying with the comebacks anymore, but Graham didn't have the energy to move, either.

"Ghk! I can't even work up the enthusiasm to demolish Shaft's skull— It's gotta be the sun! Is it because of this heat?! Damn you, sun— How can you make us suffer so much when you don't have a will of your own?!"

"How does one person have so much drama inside him?"

“Argh, I can’t. My energy is flagging. Our adventure had only just begun, but we fell to our deaths before reaching Neverland. That’s exactly how I feel. Damn you, sun... I can’t wipe you from existence no matter how much I hate you, and even if I did, I’d go down with you... Dammit, the sun does whatever it wants because it knows it’s got an unshakable advantage. It’s like our ancestors, who brought all their weapons and laid waste to the continent... Don’t tell me— Is this the wrath of the Aztecs and Incas? Aw, hell... This whole ugly mess is because of Cortés and Admiral Pizarro! It’s Quetzalcoatl... Quetzalcoatl is coming...”

“You’re like an encyclopedia of weirdness, Mr. Graham.”

As their leader moaned about the god of an ancient civilization, his young followers fell into an animated discussion about the story the reporter had told them the day before.

“So I saw that fifth victim in the papers this morning. Do you think she was connected to the Gandors, too?”

“Dunno. The guy did say he had an idea about who Thompson is, though.”

“...Meaning he couldn’t stop him.”

“Yeah, all he asked us about after that was stuff like our past and our day-to-day, that kinda thing.”

“Gnrrrgh... Quetzalcoatl... Quetzalcoatl’s coming to get us...”

“Come to think of it, didn’t you say some other paper had asked for an interview like that, Shaft?”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, they said something about wanting to talk to us soon. Unlike the *Daily Days*, they’re one of the big guys, so they’ll be shelling out plenty of dough for our time. The sooner the better.”

“Who do they think they’re writing for?”

“The world just doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Viracocha... The tsunami...”

“Man, nothing Graham’s saying makes sense, either.”

“He’s talking about Kon-Tiki, aka Viracocha, a god of the Incan empire.”

“...Look at Shaft. Always has the good stuff.”

“Speaking of things I don’t get, we haven’t seen that Dallas fella for close to two years now.”

“Maybe he retired to the country.”

“Those guys never met Graham, did they?”

“If they had, they’d probably retire to *another* country.”

“Uhhnn... Tezcatlipoca... Tezcatlipoca wants sacrifices...”

“Come to think of it, there’s that family—what’s the name? The Martillos? You heard about their pretty-boy capo?”

“I heard someone laughed at him and called him a dame, and the guy worked him over good. Then he stomped on his throat and crushed his balls and said ‘Who’s a dame again?’”

“Damn.”

“Aaaaah... Amaterasu Omikami... Amaterasu Omikami is going into hiding...”

“Hey, I think Graham’s busted.”

“He’s always busted.”

“You can’t... Don’t look at Izanami... She’s coming... Yomotsu-shikome is coming...!”

“Hey, Shaft? What the hell is Graham saying?”

“Why does this guy know so much about stuff that’s so useless?”

The delinquents kept talking, idling away the lazy summer afternoon. They'd spend the whole day like that, until sundown.

On a personal level, they'd almost given up and decided they'd be okay with that.

Until their apathy was shattered by an abrupt intruder.

"Whoa, whoa, I-I'm sorry! M-move it—outta the way!"

A boy had sprinted around the corner into the alley, slipping between Shaft and the rest of the gang to make for the other side.

"Oh, hey—"

Before Shaft could stop him, the boy dashed past them, and—

"Gwubloufuwah?!"

—stomped right on Graham's solar plexus.

After a few steps, the boy realized what he'd done.

"Ah! Agh, oh, I-I'm sorry...! I-I'm in a hurry right now, so—! Sorry!"

Offering a flustered apology over his shoulder, the boy disappeared down the alley.

Shaft and the others looked stunned. Below them, Graham was rolling around and groaning.

"...! ...! ...Gwah...! Gahargh! Worgh...he got me! Dammit! What just happened to me?! Gwaaaaah! Did Odin run me through with the Lance of Longinus?!"

"You're overreacting. Also, the Lance of Longinus isn't Odin's weapon."

Ignoring Shaft's coolheaded critique, Graham sat up, coughing violently.

"I remember now... That punk just stomped on me! Dammit... I'm furious! Right now, I'm full of rage! When you get down to it, what is

rage? A sad story or a fun story?! Argh, the not-knowing is driving me crazy, Shaft! Answer me: Who's to blame here?"

Graham was seething with emotion.

You, for lying smack in the middle of the road.

And Shaft very nearly told him, but he was positive that if he said it now, he'd be the one lying in the middle of the road next. Instead, he went with a safer answer.

"Blame whoever raised a kid to step on people and run off."

"Yeah... That's it! That's exactly what I wanted to say. Stomping on somebody, then fleeing without really saying he's sorry— How was that kid raised anyway? Dammit! It's so very sad— Are you telling me our country's children are stomping on people now?! Is this the curse of an ancient civilization, too?!"

"Aren't you full of beans today."

As they watched Graham try to blame an ancient civilization for a crime it hadn't committed, his friends were relieved that he seemed to be all right.

On the other hand, Graham was swinging his wrench around with increasing gusto.

If he kept this up, he might run out onto the avenue and start taking apart every car he could get his hands on. Just as Shaft and the rest of the group started to worry again...

...another intruder appeared in the alley, on their turf.

"Um, could I ask you all a question?"

The delinquents turned around. A young man was standing in the mouth of the alley.

He seemed to be a little older than Graham's gang. He was fairly well-dressed, and he didn't look like a businessman—not that a company man would have entered a back alley at a time like this.

That said, he didn't appear to be unemployed or a cop, or in any specific line of work.

The one peculiar thing was that he didn't react upon seeing a bunch of ne'er-do-wells like Graham and his gang. He kept right on beaming.

The young man scanned the alley restlessly, then slumped in defeat and asked, "Did a boy about five years younger than you come running through here?"

Suddenly, with a *clack*, a wrench closed on the intruder's neck.

"Let me tell you a sad...and fun story." The man in the blue coveralls shook his head slowly, and his general demeanor was shifting in a disturbing way.

"I don't know what's going on here. I do know you were chasing that brat. Meaning the fact that the kid was in a hurry, and that he knocked the wind out of me, and that the sun is hot today— It all goes back to you. And in my sadness, in my joy, let me tell you one thing!

"You. You are the root of all evil!"



Night The bookstore

After bullying the people of New York for a day, the sun set, and a different kind of light took over the city. As darkness fell, the streetlights along the roads flickered on to drive it back.

And with that, Manhattan was dressed for nighttime.

However, its energy was a little more subdued than usual today. The avenues were still fairly busy, but there was almost no one to be seen on the back streets. Perhaps it was the fear of the killer.

“...I guess I could close up for the day.”

The proprietor of the bookstore, which was located on one of those back streets, sighed. He was about to bring in the shelf of old books that had been sitting outside the shop.

But just as he stepped outside, a figure loomed up in front of him.

“Yeargh!”

He yelped, but then he realized the figure was smaller than he’d assumed—and when he resettled his glasses on his nose, he saw that the face was one he’d seen just that afternoon.

“Mister.”

“O-oh, it’s you, Mark. Good grief, you shouldn’t scare old folks like that... I thought you were Ice Pick Thompson.” The shop’s owner smiled in relief, but the boy’s expression stayed gloomy. “What’s the matter?”

“I want to hear more about what you mentioned this afternoon.”

“...I told you to forget that.” The proprietor gave a troubled sigh.

But Mark stood his ground, his eyes serious. “Please. It doesn’t matter if I try to forget it. He’s following me around!”

“Wh-what? What do you mean, Mark?” the proprietor asked, startled.

For a little while, the boy didn’t say anything.

After some time, he explained, choosing his words carefully.

“I—I saw somebody die...and then come back to life. Ever since then, he’s been following me... This evening, I finally managed to shake him...but I’m sure he’s still looking for me.”

“.....”

The proprietor fell silent, looking conflicted.

The idea of seeing somebody come back to life was nonsense. Ordinarily, you wouldn’t go around telling others about such an incident. The boy knew this.

But after the proprietor’s reaction that afternoon, he’d suspected the older man was the only person he could go to for help. That was why he’d chosen to tell him what he’d seen.

Mark only hid one key part of the story: the fact that he himself had been trying to die, too.

The proprietor thought hard for a while.

“Hmm...”

Finally, after glancing around warily and confirming there was no one else in the alley, he said, “Well, just come in for now. Come on in. Then we’ll talk.”

Once inside, the elderly man ushered Mark past the bookshelves to the counter at the back of the store. He took his place behind the counter, scanned his shop one more time, then began to explain.

“I—I guess I’ve got no choice... Listen, whatever you do, don’t tell a soul I told you this, all right?”

“O-okay.”

“The fact is...just six months ago, I saw the same thing myself. Someone coming back to life.”

“Huh?!” The boy gulped.

Still attentive to his surroundings, the elderly shopkeeper went on in a low voice. “I figured they’d put me in the hospital if I told anyone about it...but he muzzled me, you see, and I just kept it to myself. Didn’t even pretend it was a tall tale while I was out drinking.”

He’d seen it with his own eyes, but he still couldn’t believe.

“The thing is, that individual was somebody I knew well.”

“Huh... What, he was a friend of yours?”

As the boy grew more and more confused, the proprietor removed his glasses, pressed his fingertips to the inside corners of his eyes, and gave him the answer.

“He was...a fellow from the mafia group that runs this area.”

“Ma...fia...?”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re monsters or vampires or humans. You’re just a kid—you must stay away from them, no matter what.”

The
newshound
hammers
his own
opinions

into
society

CHAPTER 5



CHAPTER 5: The newshound hammers his own opinions into society

New York Wall Street The third floor of a certain building

“Hey there, Lester. Fame sure is rough, huh?”

“Stop, please.”

As the young journalist walked through the door, the other reporters all started razzing him at once.

Here at the editorial department of a major newspaper, one journalist had become the center of attention as the first eyewitness of an Ice Pick Thompson incident.

Lester, the young reporter, lowered himself wearily into his chair.

The other journalists considered whether to talk to him, but when they saw the chief editor approaching, they figured it could wait and returned to their own jobs.

“Lester, you okay?”

“Oh... There’s no problem.”

“How was the police inquiry? You’re usually one of the ones outside, asking how things are going in there.”

“Well, it wasn’t pleasant. They suspected I might be the culprit.”

Remembering what had happened in the interrogation room, Lester gave a short, sharp sigh.

He wrinkled his lip in utter disgust, as if he’d just bitten into a cockroach. From that expression alone, it wasn’t hard to imagine how he’d been treated.

“I bet so. After all, you submitted your article before the inquiry... Our president got a harshly worded complaint from the police, too.”

“Should probably apologize to him, then.”

“Hey, he was happy. He said sales of today’s morning edition were up thirty percent from yesterday, thanks to that.”

The man smiled wryly and shrugged, and some of the life returned to Lester’s face.

Once he’d brightened up a little, the chief editor went on gently.

“Geez Louise. The cops asked me for every little detail of your alibi, too. They wanted to know where you were researching while the previous four incidents were happening, for example.”

“Yes, and when I finally thought they were done suspecting me, they started doubting my testimony. They said I’d cooked it up on the spur of the moment, to sell more papers.”

“Yeah, well, they’re probably desperate to know whether it’s true or false. After all, it’s the first actual eyewitness testimony. Our paper’s gotten a ton of anonymous postcards, too, but it’s all bushwa. Some were so sure it was the work of ‘the Rail Tracer.’ Do you see any rails here?”

The man laughed in exasperated amazement, and Lester shook his head with a wan smile.

“Yes, I know how you feel. Up till yesterday, all the false information was giving me headaches as well.”

“You said it.”

The chief editor smiled again. Then his smile faded slightly, and he picked up a copy of their morning edition.

It listed the characteristics of Ice Pick Thompson, according to Lester.

- **Arms and legs are abnormally long.**
- **Gaunt, wet with rain; he didn’t use an umbrella.**
- **Face was hidden by the collar of his coat and his distinctive hat.**

- **Held an ice pick in his left hand.**

That was all. Constructing a mental image based on that information alone, it would be easy to assume it was fake.

“Makes me think of that old story—Spring-Heeled Jack. Minus the fox fire and bouncing.”

The demonic phantom was said to have actually existed in England at one point.

Lester sighed. “He isn’t that bizarre. He’s on Jack the Ripper’s level at best.”

“Still. What I’m getting at is that your eyewitness account is kinda half-assed in several places. Are you thinking about what’ll happen when they catch the guy? Is that why you’re worried about saying anything too clear?”

“That’s right. I’d rather not be called a liar.”

As they were talking, the staff member who’d been tending the phone raised a hand to get their attention.

“Lester. Phone call for you.”

“Oh, come on. The police again?” the chief editor complained.

The man shook his head, putting a hand over the receiver.

“He says he’s a Mr. Carl from the *Daily Days*.”



Evening The speakeasy Alveare

The bar was filled with a sweet aroma.

Alveare (Italian for “beehive”) was an odd little place, located between Little Italy and Chinatown.

Outwardly, it was a honey shop that fit its name, but it had another, hidden side.

If you walked between the shelves stocked with jars of honey, you'd find your way to the cash register, and behind it was a sturdy door with a peephole. If the proprietress let you through that door, you found yourself inside a direct result of the Prohibition Act.

A law that banned alcohol.

The law had been created with the public goal of societal order, but what it had produced was a kind of societal lawlessness several times more absurd and magnificent than it had been before the law was passed, and it had considerably more support from the people.

Speakeasies were where people could come together away from the eyes of the law and drink forbidden liquor together.

Both men and women stopped by in search of alcohol, and sometimes children visited, too. These nocturnal watering holes were built in the spaces between the citizens' thoughts and the law, and they could never be made public.

In this era, New York teemed with these disguised underground taverns. There were said to be more than thirty-two thousand of them in New York alone, and finding a street that didn't have one was a nearly impossible task.

The mafia amassed their power with bootleg liquor, and as a result, the effect of the law was the exact opposite of what had been intended. Most people rejected the restrictions of the Prohibition Act in favor of the allure of alcohol on the night wind.

In the back of a tailor's shop.

On the second floor of a car factory.

In a shoemaker's warehouse.

In the bottom of a boat moored by the riverbank.

In an unused operating room at a hospital.

These loopholes in the law existed even inside churches and funeral parlors.

Alveare was yet another sanctuary built in one of those loopholes.

As Lester made his way toward the back of the place, he glanced around warily.

The interior of the speakeasy looked like the set of a musical. The milk-white walls were illuminated by chandeliers, shining with a golden color that was reminiscent of honey.

The establishment was far bigger than the building's exterior seemed to suggest, and it held about ten large, round tables covered with white tablecloths.

"I'd heard rumors about this, but..."

Apparently, several of what he'd assumed were separate buildings on the outside were connected on the inside. That thought changed Lester's assessment of the speakeasy.

The Martillo Family.

He'd heard that an organization by that name ran this place. The gang was led by Molsa Martillo, and according to its members, it wasn't technically mafia. They said it was part of the Camorra, an organization that had originated in the southern Italian city of Naples.

He didn't know the difference between the mafia and the Camorra, and in his work as a journalist, Lester had never investigated this group very deeply.

I thought this outfit was too small to be bothered with... But I'll be damned. From the looks of this place, you'd think it was run directly by one of the big syndicates in Chicago.

There was a stage of sorts at the back of the establishment, with more lightbulbs than usual around it.

On that stage, an Asian girl in a cheongsam was dancing with a large sword, and most of the customers were enjoying her flowing performance alongside the bootleg liquor.

Still, it practically reeks of honey in here.

The smell of honey was far stronger in the speakeasy than it had been among the jars of honey in the store.

The cloying fragrance mingled with the alcohol, and he wondered if drinking might make him sick.

Thinking he should probably hurry and sit down, Lester took another look around the place, and—

—at a table in the back, he saw a raised hand and a face he recognized.

Carl.

His old colleague.

A veteran reporter with more experience than he had.

And—the man he'd once tried to emulate.

And now he's just a loser who switched to a dinky little paper.

Spotting the man he was trying to develop that conviction about, Lester swallowed hard, steeled himself, and started toward him.

"Hey, Lester. It's been a long time."

"...Evening."

Nodding to the man, Lester took a seat.

Carl poured liquor into a cup for him. "Did she let you in without trouble?"

"Yes, quite easily, once I mentioned your name... I'm glad to see you're in good health."

“Well, I am, yes.”

“How’s your daughter doing?” Lester casually asked, watching to see the other man’s reaction.

In order to care for his ill daughter, this man had moved from the fast-paced workload of the major paper to the *Daily Days*, which could give him more flexible hours. Lester had heard the story, but as far as he was concerned, when Carl had disappeared, he’d just sneakily quit while he was ahead.

However—

“Oh, she died the year before last.”

“.....”

The man’s frank remark left Lester speechless.

“But she didn’t suffer too much. For that I’m grateful.”

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Nah. It’s my fault for not getting in touch with you about the funeral. I wanted to lay her to rest quietly, you see, so I didn’t tell anyone except relatives and the president of my current company. Both my wife and my daughter died before I did, so now I can go to bars without worrying about what time I get home.”

Is that how it is?

Lester had no way to determine whether the other man’s actions were right or wrong, but he probably wouldn’t have gone to the funeral even if he had been contacted. He decided not to pursue the subject further. Instead, he asked about the reason for this meeting.

“Why did you call me here?”

“Ah, direct as ever. I’ve told you it’s easier to get information if you get a guy drunk first, haven’t I?”

“I’m well aware that wouldn’t work on you.” Lester’s face was expressionless while he answered.

Carl smiled quietly back at him.

As the silence became unbearable, Lester took a sip from his glass, but—

“It’s sweet?!”

—at the unexpected flavor, he abruptly pulled the glass away from his lips. Forget the alcohol; the sweetness was enough to burn his throat all on its own.

Watching Lester blink rapidly in surprise, Carl smirked, and he laughed out loud. “Ha-ha! It’s a shock, isn’t it? This place puts honey in their liquor. Everyone reacts that way at first.”

“...Are you tryin’ to mess with me?”

“No, no. Once you get used to the sugar content, it’s actually quite good,” Carl replied, taking a sip himself.

Lester watched him, bristling, but he went on with the conversation.

“And? If you’ve got business, hurry up and state it. I’m a busy man, you know.”

“Yes, I saw today’s morning edition.”

“...Thanks.”

“It’s incredible. I bet you really impressed editorial with that one.”

...What’s he doing?

From what Lester knew, Carl wasn’t the type to be sarcastic or gripe. He’d switched to another newspaper, then lost his daughter. Had it changed him?

As Lester puzzled over his former coworker’s behavior—Carl smiled, citing a passage from the article.

“‘He was a thin man with abnormally long arms, and his face was hidden by his hat and collar,’ hmm...?”

Carl grinned—and then his smile abruptly vanished, and his sharp eyes met Lester’s.

“...That’s bullshit, isn’t it?”

Silence.

On the stage, the sword dance was reaching its climax, and Carl and Lester’s conversation didn’t travel beyond their table.

Still, Carl kept his voice low.

The claim that Lester’s testimony was a lie could destroy his future.

How much time had passed?

A few seconds ticked by, but they felt like hours to Lester. When he finally responded, his face was neutral.

“And here I wondered what this was about. But you’re just jealous? You may be the one who came up with the Ice Pick Thompson name, but scoops on that story belong to whoever gets them.”

“Of course. As long as they’re true.”

“Cut it out,” Lester said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to dislike you any more than I already—”

But Carl interrupted, rather aggressively. “Did you think I didn’t know?”

“...Huh?”

“Did you think I couldn’t check into those five victims?”

“What are you...?” The expression on Lester’s face was uncomprehending, but his gaze was elsewhere.

Carl set his elbows on the table, clasped his hands in front of his mouth, and kept on talking to the younger reporter, who still refused to look at him.

“No, it’s not what connects the five of them...”

“.....”

“If we include you, it’s six.”

At those words, Lester fell silent.

It wasn’t clear how Carl interpreted that; he focused on Lester and quietly continued.

“You noticed it, too, didn’t you? When the first victim turned up, I bet you thought it was just a coincidence. Or you tried to think so. You did the same thing when the second one was killed.”

“.....”

“By the third and fourth victims, though, you must have been sure: These serial murders were not random or for fun.”

“Why...? I don’t understand what you’re saying. How do you think I’m connected to the victims?” Lester bravely soldiered on, but his face was already pale. He tried to take a drink of liquor to camouflage his discomfort, but it was too sweet; the smell was an assault on his nostrils, and he couldn’t get the liquid down his throat.

“You know that very well yourself. The *Daily Days* newspaper may be relatively minor...but I’d bet its abilities as an information broker are beyond what you can imagine. I’m always startled by how sharp-eared and perceptive the president and vice president are, myself, but I digress.”

“.....”

“I don’t know whether you actually saw a murderer. But *if the murderer is the person you imagine them to be...then if that person*

were arrested, you'd be up a creek, wouldn't you? On the other hand, you also can't leave them on the loose. After all—"

"...I'm sorry, I really have no idea what you're talking about. I have to edit tomorrow's articles, so I'll be going now." With that, Lester rapidly got to his feet.

A voice called after him, but he ignored it and dashed out of the shop.

The proprietress held him back for just a moment, but when he told her "Carl's paying," she easily let him go.

Run. Run. Run.

Run. Run. Run. Run.

Runrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrun.

He had no idea where he'd run, or how.

Nevertheless, to get even a little farther away from Carl, he kept running from alley to alley to alley—

Finally, exhausted, he braced his hands on the wall at a corner of the alley and vomited up what little liquor he'd managed to get down.

He'd been running from Carl's words more than from the man himself. And from the "fact" those words represented.

Dammit.

Dammit, dammit, dammit. Why—why is this happening?

Then he remembered all that he'd witnessed. Everything he knew.

The thing he had in common with the victims, something only he should have known.

Leaning against the brick wall, he shouted into the deserted alley.

It was the one and only solid fact he could know right now.

“Dammit, goddammit... If it’s true... If Ice Pick Thompson really is who I think it is, then...”

There was no telling what his eyes were seeing as his frightened gaze wandered through the darkness.

“Then... Then the next target—! It... *It’s gonna be me!*”

He forced himself to acknowledge the hopeless truth with a scream no one else would hear.

“I’m... I’m the only one left!”



Meanwhile Somewhere in Little Italy

In an alley just off Mulberry Street, a lone boy stood frozen before the entrance of a small jazz hall.

The free and easy notes of the music filtered out, beckoning passersby into the building.

Yet, the boy couldn’t move.

He stayed there in front of the door, unable to leave, unable to step inside. All he could do was stand there, like a stone statue.

They’re just on the other side of this door. They’re here, in the basement of this place... The Gandor Family.

The Gandor Family.

They were the small syndicate in charge of this area, and if he could believe what the proprietor of the used bookstore had told him, they seemed to have some connection with people who didn’t die.

This very jazz hall was their hideout, and although the proprietor hadn’t said his name, that immortal was probably in there, too.

And yet Mark couldn’t take that first step.

Remembering why he'd come here, he tried over and over to summon the nerve, but—

If I step over this threshold, I really won't be able to go back anymore.

—the conflict in his mind kept his feet rooted in front of the entrance.

The boy had resolved to die once. Why was he here, then? Why was he preparing to face an immortal monster?

With all these emotions and questions inside him, the boy waited.

There was a *snik*, and an easygoing voice reached the boy from somewhere behind and above him. “Saaay, what’s the matter?”

“Huh...?” When Mark turned around, he heard that sound again.

Snik.

Snik.

It wasn't unfamiliar, but he couldn't place it at first.

Not until he saw that the man behind him was holding two enormous pairs of gleaming silver scissors.

“You're not going in?”

“Aah! ...U-um...”

“It's okaaaay—they have juice and other drinks for kids, tooooo. I drink them all the time, so if you ask, they'll bring you some right awaaaay.”

From his voice and gestures alone, he seemed like an agreeable young man, if rather childlike.

Except the scissors in his hands lent an air of insanity to his smile.

Mark didn't know his name, but he was Gandor Family's top torture specialist, Tick Jefferson.

Standing in front of him...

...the young torturer smiled innocently and snicked his scissors.

Snik snik

Snip, snip snick



Interlude

Some time ago, in the shadows of the city, an incident had occurred.

People living in the ordinary way had only seen and heard a few parts of it.

One was that a supposedly deserted warehouse had burned to the ground, in what appeared to be a case of arson. Another was reports of machine-gun fire in the no-man's-land between Little Italy and Chinatown. Yet another was the trail of scattered bundles of bills leading from that neighborhood to the train station.

People were too busy with their own lives to link these incidents together.

Prohibition had already taken over the city, and a variety of incidents linked to its underbelly were still playing out. In Chicago, a major mafioso had been arrested, while a new mafia syndicate was extending its reach across the whole of America. The color of these incidents was so deep that it had begun to bleed through to the ordinary lives of the masses as well.

That being the case, a fire and gunshots didn't startle people all that much.

However—these incidents were connected beneath the surface, beneath most people's awareness, and they had ended up affecting the future in a variety of ways.

Two syndicates were at the heart of the incident.

One robber couple had disturbed it.

And one old alchemist had dragged it to this part of the city.

The alchemist's name was Szilard Quates.

In a desperate bid to slake his own desires, the old man had dug his fingernails in—

—and those torn-off remains were still eating away at the city.

For example, a maggot spawned in the gouges he'd left.

Ice Pick Thompson.

Was it “he,” “she,” or maybe “they”?

Almost nothing related to Szilard had emerged from the shadows.

Even so, the people of New York accepted Ice Pick Thompson as an incident that belonged to their world, the world out in the light. After all, there was no knowing when one would become the next victim, and all the papers covered the incident in sensational ways.

But day after day went by, and neither the police nor the papers managed to close in on the killer's true identity.

The people didn't know.

This series of bizarre murders was connected to the fire and bill-scattering incidents that had occurred two years before.

And this summer...

...a boy who wanted to die braced himself to confront an immortal monster...

...and a reporter who feared death braced himself to face Ice Pick Thompson.

Tick Jefferson
innocently and **noisily** cuts up fruit



CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6: Tick Jefferson innocently and noisily cuts up fruit

Snik snik snick-snick

Snip snik snip-snip

With those sounds in his ears, Mark was looking at the ground.

This underground room was the office of the Gandor Family. They'd brought him grape juice, but he hadn't touched it. He simply stayed silent, his face pale.

The jazz hall on the floor above was named Coraggioso, a word that meant "brave" in Italian. Fittingly, the boy had taken a courageous leap into the unknown.

...And now he was frozen, unable to do a thing.

The air around him was thick with cigarette smoke, and the jazz music from the next floor up added an air of sophistication to his surroundings.

It was clearly no place for a boy like Mark.

Several men were hanging out in the room, entertaining themselves with poker and similar games at other tables.

The men had glanced the boy's way when he had first entered, but as soon as they saw he was a guest of the man with the scissors, they lost interest and went back to what they were doing.

A moment ago, a man had come in and asked, "What's with the kid?"

"Friend of Tick's, probably. He always plays with the kids in the neighborhood when he doesn't have work."

"...Does he take the scissors along?"

“Yeah.”

“Not that I’ve got room to talk, but, uh...are the cops asleep or something?”

And that conversation was the only thing that happened.

It was less that the Gandor men were actively disinterested than that they were hesitant to get involved with a regular citizen—but their behavior could have been interpreted as indifference, and right now, to Mark, it was an invisible pressure that made it hard to breathe.

What am I doing anyway...?

Until just yesterday, he’d been planning to die. He still was, in fact.

But ever since he’d run into that immortal monster, his emotions and logic had become totally confused.

What in the world is he? Why is he bothering with somebody like me?

Somebody like me.

The boy had decided he had no value whatsoever. In fact, he even thought the world would be better off without him.

It was less a fact he’d resigned himself to and more of a wish for himself—

—but things were different now.

That monster with the eerily casual smile had taken an interest in him, and he had bigger questions than his own value.

Something had crossed the bounds of common sense and shown itself to him openly. Someone steely enough to ignore that and die anyway might never have considered suicide in the first place.

Even so—if he’d been able to calm down and collect himself again, the boy might have been able to choose death after all. However, in

the course of investigating that immortal human, he'd heard the name of a certain organization, and he couldn't ignore that, either.

The Gandor Family.

What significance did this name have for the boy? The men around him had no idea, and neither did the man with scissors who'd brought him here.

In fact, the boy himself wasn't entirely sure. He was just about to start reviewing his own past connection to the Gandors, give some fresh thought to what he should do, when—

"Say, what are you doing, amigo?"

—he heard the voice of a surprisingly cheerful woman.

"Huh?!"

"This is no place for kids, you know? I know the orange juice Edith makes is amazing, but if you don't keep your wits about you, these scary guys might sell you off."

When Mark looked up, there was a woman who seemed like a saloon girl across the table from him. She had her elbows on the tabletop and was leaning in, bringing her face close to his.

He guessed she was Mexican and about twenty, or maybe a little younger.

Guileless would initially seem like a good word to describe her, but the two katana at her waist appeared to be real.

"Um, I, uh..."

He wasn't sure how to respond, and as he hesitated, someone called languidly from the kitchen.

"Oh, don't do that, Mariaaaa; no threatening him. He's a gueeeest."

The voice belonged to the man with scissors, and he sounded perfectly relaxed. For a moment, the girl he'd called Maria stared blankly. Then she sat down across from Mark.

"A guest? How about that. Why'd you come here? Oh! Let me guess... Did you come to order a hit from me, amigo?! Sure thing! I'll do it for free, just for you! Who do you want me to kill?"

"Huh...?" Mark was speechless after the outrageous question.

He assumed she was joking, but a sickening, irritated feeling spread through his stomach.

"Killing people...is one of the worst things you can do."

"Sure is! So who should I kill?"

"....."

"I'll kill anybody for you. The stronger the better—it's more fun that way!"

Realizing she wasn't the type of person you could actually converse with, Mark turned away. He was done with this.

Meanwhile, the man with the scissors was walking toward them from that direction, snicking away. In his free hand, he was carrying a plate of food.

"I just fixed something to eaaat. Want some?"

On the plate were slices of ham, cut into perfectly equal pieces and arranged around an apple in the center.

There was no telling how he'd done it with scissors, but the top half of the apple had been beautifully carved into the shape of a hat-wearing man and woman who were holding hands.

"Wow, that's incredible...", the boy murmured.

But then, right before his eyes, Tick snipped the carving apart.

“Aah!”

Severed from its apple base, the fruit sculpture rolled and fell. Maria smoothly scooped up the couple, whose hands were about to come apart—and bit off the man.

“...Mm-hm...mm-hm... That’s good, amigo. Here, have some.”

Maria held the bereaved apple woman out to Mark.

The men around them were either watching them wearily or ignoring them completely.

I was wrong, Mark thought, looking at the innocent smiles of the two at his table. *I shouldn’t have come here.*

He hadn’t been hurt. They hadn’t stolen anything from him. He hadn’t been threatened emotionally. Yet, in the course of this brief exchange, the boy had realized something.

This place is—wrong.

This was not a place he should be.

The words the Mexican girl had said earlier, the ones he’d taken for a joke, had begun to acquire a devastating aura of truth.

Oh. Oh no. I completely misunderstood. Back then, when she said she’d kill anyone, it wasn’t a joke. She wasn’t teasing me because I’m a kid. This woman is serious. She’d seriously kill anyone. She said what she said to a kid like me, and she meant every word...

She’s that unhinged.

He could sense an immediate danger, as if something were about to crush his life in its fist if he didn’t get out of there right that second.

No... Wait. You were already planning to die, remember?

Even when he reminded himself of his resolve, fear bound his heart tightly.

It wasn't that he was afraid of dying.

The boy was still prepared to die, but even then, he was afraid.

That unsettling sense that he wasn't where he was supposed to be turned into a terror that surpassed everything and tightened around his heart.

He really should have just jumped off that bridge, he thought.

The idea actually calmed him down.

After all, he shouldn't be on this earth in the first place. In that case, it didn't matter where he was.

Once splitting hairs had helped him get his fear under control, the boy quietly asked, "Miss... Would you really kill anyone?"

"Huh? Sure. Except an amigo you're fighting with. I need something interesting. I used to fight with Elita all the time, but now that I can't see her anymore, those fights are a good memory, too. If I kill your friend, you won't be able to fight anymore, you know?" Maria said, waxing nostalgic.

Dexterously peeling an apple with scissors, Tick asked, "Who's Eliiita?"

"My amiga back in Mexico. She'd sleep with anything male, she was quick with her fists, and she was always throwing knives at me. I haven't seen her for a while, though, so I don't know what she's up to these days!" She gave a carefree laugh.

"Um..., " Mark said, his expression serious.

"Oh, sorry, amigo. I forgot about you! So? Who should I kill?"

"Well... Just hypothetically..."

"Mm-hm?"

Maria nodded with amusement, and the boy asked her a leading question.

“If, say...you were up against an immortal monster, are you saying you could kill them?”

Well. I said it.

If she decided he was a lunatic and kicked him out, that would be fine.

If she did know something about immortals, she might get flustered.

However, if there really was a connection here, and she got suspicious of him...

No... I’m not... I’m not afraid to die.

That was the thought in his mind as he steeled himself to ask the question, but—

“Huh? Immortal? *You mean like our bosses?*”

“...Huh?”

Maria had answered so nonchalantly that for a moment, Mark didn’t understand what she’d said. She ignored him and went on.

“Hmm. If you’re asking whether I could *kill* them or not, I probably couldn’t. But if you just want me to take them down, then I dunno, amigo! A long time back, I took the boss’s arm and—”

“Whoa, Maria, dooon’t. Mr. Luck and the others said that was a seeecret, remember?” Tick said.

Maria gasped and put a hand over her mouth. “Ohhh, I’m sorry, amigo! Uh, what I just told you was a dream! That somebody told me about! Okay? If you think too much about it, you’ll get sleepy, all right, amigo?”

“.....”

Maria’s excuse didn’t make much sense.

Mark just felt stunned—but he quickly came back to himself.

“Um...”

Snik.

What he’d been about to say was cut off by the too-sharp sound of scissors.

Mark flinched, swallowing instead of letting out his next breath. Every muscle in his body tensed, and with some difficulty, he turned his gaze toward the sound—toward the young man who was opening and closing his scissors with gusto.

But the young man was still wearing a childlike smile, and his voice was a gentle murmur.

“I wouldn’t ask seriously if I were youuu.”

“.....”

“If you told anybody about it, they’d probably laugh at you. Or...” He slowly opened the scissors and snapped them shut. His voice was still calm. “Did you come here to find out about people who don’t die?”

“.....”

Dammit.

It was only natural, really. He didn’t think he could hide the truth from them any longer.

What would they do to him?

He gulped with fright at the thought—but the young man with the scissors only shook his head, his expression still kind.

“In that case, you shouldn’t beee here.”

“Huh...?”

“If you ask a question here, you’ll have to give something in retuuurn, you know? Even if you’re a kid.”

His voice was so innocent, and there was so little artifice in him that his mental age almost seemed younger than Mark’s. The utter lack of tension around him created a vaguely childish air.

Although he’d only just met this boy, the young man definitely had his number.

“And if you put yourself in debt to people like theeem, it can get pretty hiiiiry.”

“B-but...”

“I don’t know what happened to you, but if you want to know about thooose people, you shouldn’t ask heeere. Everyone’s already on edge.”

“O-on edge?” The boy looked around, but the men weren’t paying any attention to his table.

He didn’t know whether they hadn’t been able to hear their conversation or if they were just ignoring it. Either way, he didn’t see any especially angry faces among all the tough-looking men.

Snicking his scissors again, the young man went on matter-of-factly.

“Uh-huh... Do you know about Mr. Ice Pick Thompson?”

“.....”

The boy nodded wordlessly, and the young man continued, scissors snipping rhythmically.

“It was somebody who’d only just joined up, buuut...Mr. Ice Pick Thompson killed a man from our syndicate.”

“Killed...”

“That’s right. So you seeeee, you need to be careful. Don’t wanna get dragged into that, you knooow?”

Before the young man could say anything more—

—footsteps echoed from upstairs, and a man poked his head in.

The men in the office shot cold, wary glances at him, then promptly relaxed and went back to their business. The one who was closest to the stairs lightly raised a hand in greeting.

“Hiya, Carl. Sorry, Keith and the boys are out right now.”

“Hmm. I see. Apologies for the intrusion, then.”

“This is rare. You don’t normally show up without calling ahead.”

“Mm... Something suddenly turned up, and it has me worried.”

That conversation reached Mark’s ears faintly.

At first, he assumed the visitor had ties to the mafia, but when he heard the next bit of the exchange, his eyes widened.

“Is this about the Ice Pick Thompson incidents?”

“Yes, and also...that matter we were discussing...”

“Wait.” The mafioso raised a hand, cutting Carl off. “Let’s continue this in the back.”

No longer smiling, he took the other man into another room.

For a little while, Mark gazed after them, but—

“Oh yes, that’s riiight. That man just now would be safe.”

“Huh?”

Still playing with the glinting scissors, the smiling young man explained. “He’s a journaliist from the *Daily Days*. He’s also an information broker, so I bet he’ll tell you aaall sorts of things, you know? Including about those people who don’t die.”

The man's voice was as innocent as ever, and Mark couldn't tell what he was really thinking. Maybe he wasn't thinking much of anything at all.

The boy looked down quietly, repeating the other man's words. "A journalist...from the *Daily Days*."

"Uh-huh. They're reeeeeeally amazing over there. Just pay them with money or a secret, and they'll tell you aaanything."

"...Anything?"

"Uh-huh. They'll tell you all about us, too. Even the stuff that would get you killed if you asked here. Aaanything."

That was a rather ominous thing to be saying so casually, but Mark wasn't paying attention to that. He looked down, thinking hard.

The idea of an information broker had struck him as dubious, but if the man was from a newspaper, it was plausible he would engage in that sort of business on the side.

Maybe...everything I want to know is...

But I don't have any money...

...

Mark fell silent for a little while. Then he abruptly stood up and murmured "Thank you...very much" to the young man with the scissors. With that, he started up the stairs.

"Huh? Hey, wait a minute. Who did you want me to slash, amigo?" the girl called after him.

She sounded disappointed, but the boy let her voice go in one ear and out the other as he left the mafia office.

It looked as if he was going to put the jazz hall behind him entirely, but instead, he leaned against the wall of a building a short distance away and quietly kept watch over the entrance.

His eyes were tranquil.

But they also shone with determination.



Gunmeister Smith makes
his comeback, with nobody the wiser

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7: Gunmeister Smith makes his comeback, with nobody the wiser

Speakeasy Jane Doe

The speakeasy was fairly spacious, with many seats but almost no customers.

That was only to be expected: This underground bar was quite literally built underground—and what lay above it was a New York graveyard.

The interior was as eerie as if it had been designed to match the location—from the ambience alone, one might have believed it was a vampire's lair.

The proprietor had a badly scarred face, and he was dressed entirely in black. Behind the counter, there was a shotgun and an enormous machete to scare off any potential robbers. Most of the handful of customers seemed to feel they'd come to the wrong place, and the majority would probably never be back.

The atmosphere was far from conducive to enjoying a round of liquor—

—but a group of people were laughing as if they were doing just that.

“Ah-ha-ha! Boy, do I know it! This place gives me the creeps! Which is a good thing, in my book... Even the owner seems like something from another planet, which means it's so creepy that I can forget completely about the troubles of the world and have fun! The liquor here is the best. It's watered down to about one part in a thousand, meaning there's barely any booze in it at all! Even I don't have to worry about drinkin' it.”

“Ah-ha-ha! One part in a thousand! That’s incredible! It’s practically nonalcoholic!”

“Nah, nah, that’s what’s so great about it. They say a shark can smell even a single drop of blood from miles away, see? My heart’s just as sensitive to alcohol as those sharp-nosed sharks. It means when I get drunk, it hits way harder than for most people! It’s a thousand-for-one deal on intoxication... Don’t you think it’s a bargain? Damn, this is getting fun. Dunno why.”

“It really is a bargain... I sense a new business opportunity here. If we could help people get drunk more easily, we could water down the liquor in proportion and sell it... This could work! It’ll make everybody happy!”

He flashed an enthusiastic thumbs-up, and the man in the blue coveralls smacked it with glee.

“This is fun... Let me tell you a fun story! Wow, I haven’t enjoyed a drink this much in quite a while!”

“No, no, I could say the same. It’s been a long time since I met anyone this interesting.”

Next to this animated conversation, Graham’s friends were quietly drinking their liquor, wearing expressions that were impossible to describe.

“...Forget enjoying a drink. That stuff may be watered down a thousand times, but Graham hasn’t touched a drop of it yet anyway.”

“He can get drunk without even touchin’ the booze. Must be nice.”

“You wanna switch personalities with Graham, then?”

“D-don’t even joke, Shaft...”

They all smiled thinly, sour-faced.

Meanwhile, Graham had completely warmed up to the man he'd met just that afternoon.



Somewhere in New York An alley

Turn back the clock to one in the afternoon on that intensely sunny day.

On the outskirts of Manhattan, a shout both chilling and hot with passion cut through the lazy heat.

"I don't know what's going on here. I do know you were chasing that brat. Meaning the fact that the brat was in a hurry, and that he knocked the wind out of me, and that the sun is hot today— It all goes back to you. And in my sadness, in my joy, let me tell you one thing!"

Tightening his grip on his wrench, Graham unjustly accused the man in front of him of crimes he couldn't possibly have committed.

"You. You are the root of all evil!"

Then, just as the silver bludgeon was about to come down—

"I... I am?!"

—the would-be victim shouted, and the fast-moving wrench stopped dead.

"It... It can't be. It's this hot today because of me...? That's terrible! I'm sorry; I completely didn't notice...! How can I make it up to you? I had no idea this town was in crisis because of me!"

Then he gripped Graham's hand firmly and shook it vigorously.

"Thank you... Thank you so, so much! You've shown me the error of my ways!"

Graham turned back to his companions, looking dazed. “Hmm... I’m a little lost here. Is he thanking me, Shaft?”

“Yeah, although I dunno what’s going on, either. What should we do? This guy’s a real loon.”

Graham’s friends were shooting confused glances at one another, but the man wasn’t bothered by their strange looks. He turned back to Graham, eyes shining.

“Okay! Now that we’ve got the cause figured out, let’s think about how to conquer this heat! If it’s ’cause of me, should I maybe try jumping into the river and cooling myself off?”

“Oh, this is fun... Let me tell you a fun story! It just hit me! In that case, if we jumped in the river, we’d all cool off! Okay, Shaft, let’s head for the river, ASAP. If we let the river wash us out into the ocean and howl at the setting sun, don’t you think that’s its own form of happiness?!”

“No, really, don’t! This ain’t a clean mountain river here!” Shaft yelled back.

Meanwhile, the cheerful man was smiling at all of them equally. He appeared to be mulling over this matter, and then—

“What about dumping strong liquor over our heads? It’ll cool us off as it evaporates!”

“That’s brilliant! Hell... Shaft, this is nuts. We’ve got a genius here. He’s the savior coming to rescue us from our ennui! Dammit... What idiot said he was the root of all evil a minute ago?!”

“That’d be you, Mr. Graham.”

“How can this be?! Dammit, I’m sad! Life is insanely sad! I treated the savior of the world as the root of all evil... He came to help us, and I treated him as an enemy... In the end, am I the world’s enemy?

Or is the world my enemy?! Either way, it's hopeless now... I can never be forgiven."

Graham took the shock with typical melodrama, falling to his knees.

The man who had appeared in the alley smiled kindly at the eccentric fellow, then patted him on the shoulder.

"It's all right. Even if the world doesn't forgive you, you only need to have one person who does. Just smile for them. If nobody forgives you, then I'll forgive you! Even if I don't know what for!"

"I'll be damned... The savior of the world said he'd forgive me, his enemy...! Shaft, what do I do? How am I supposed to respond to this?!"

"Sleep. Please. Just watching this is giving me a headache."

After that...

Graham had gone to a nearby hideout and poured some of their rubbing alcohol over his head, then breathed in enough fumes to get blind drunk on them.

The man who'd introduced himself as Elmer had taken the fallen Graham to a nearby doctor, and so...

"I can't believe it! Not only has my enemy forgiven me, he's shown me mercy!"

...Graham was impressed in his own unique way, and they'd ended up hitting it off.



And now back to the present.

As they listened to the overly excited conversation at the next table over, Shaft and the others were whispering to each other with bemused expressions.

("Still... You know what this is. I've thought so for a while now, but...most of the guys who hit it off with Graham are real loonies.")

("Well, birds of a feather flock together. So what does that say about us?")

("Yeah, well... Ladd was about as over the edge as they come...")

("Honestly, I'm pretty impressed we're still okay after hangin' around with him.")

("Well, Ladd won't kill anyone he's decided is his friend. Maybe people with weird beliefs attract each other.")

("Case in point: this Elmer guy.")

("Yeah, he said he 'wanted smiles from everyone in the world' with a straight face. I don't think he's religious or anything.")

A little while ago, when Elmer had told Graham his goal, Graham's eyebrows had drawn together.

"Oho... Smiles from everyone in the world? What's in it for you? How would it change the world? It's a totally impossible dream, and I bet you'll get a lot more sadness than smiles along the way. They'll mock you and call you a hypocrite. Maybe all those smiles will be because they're laughing at you. Why do you want to see smiles that badly after all that? Are you saying you'll swaddle the world in happiness?! What for?!"

Elmer's response to that long speech of a question was a brief one.

"Because it'll make me happy."

After a few seconds' silence—Graham tapped his own forehead lightly with his wrench.

"I see... Yeah, that makes sense."

(“He grins a lot, too, but his eyes were serious. I’m telling you, the guy ain’t all there. Even the hypocrites don’t usually say ‘I’m working for world peace for my own sake.’”)

(“Although Graham’s his own kind of nuts for thinking it makes sense.”)

The men kept on muttering to each other, but then—

—a bell rang from the entrance to the speakeasy, announcing a new arrival.

“Huh...?”

When Graham’s group realized who this new arrival was, they looked at one another.

Even though it was summer, the man was wearing a long coat that fell below his knees, and his general appearance was patently suspicious.

In the opening between his hat and the collar of his coat, they could see his sharp eyes and glimpses of what looked like a big scar on his face.

Graham was still too deep in conversation with Elmer to have even noticed the guest.

Shaft and the others, though, exchanged looks, confirming they recognized the man.

(“Hey, that’s... Isn’t that——?”)

(“Yeah, if he’s wearing a coat at this time of year, it’s him for sure.”)

(“Come to think of it, he wasn’t at the doctor’s place today.”)



("They let him out of the hospital?")

("Oh, here he comes.")

As the man in the long coat approached, the group of delinquents nodded to him.

"...Hey."

The only response from the man in the long coat was a brief murmur as he strode right up to Graham's chair.

Graham and Elmer were still oblivious, shooting the breeze about nothing in particular.

"Hey. Kid Graham. How've you been?"

When the tall man loomed up beside their table, their conversation stopped dead. And thanks to the speakeasy's naturally oppressive atmosphere, that meant a perfect silence fell over the place.

It felt as if time had stopped, though no one knew how long.

The scarred proprietor began polishing glasses, and as the cloth made little squeaks— Graham's half-open eyes went wide.

"Smith!" he cried.

"Keh-keh... Haven't seen you in a while." A mirthless laugh issued from inside the man's collar. Still standing, he snapped his fingers and called "The usual" to the proprietor.

"The usual? You haven't been by in more than six months; what are you talking about?" The proprietor sounded cross, but he smoothly began making a cocktail.

"I was away on a little trip. A journey to find myself."

"? What're you talking about, chief? The Gandors put you in the hospital, didn't they?" Graham asked indifferently.

“Ghk...!” Smith’s expression froze. “Wh... Who told you a bald-faced lie like that...?”

“This nutty saloon girl with two katana. She was saying, ‘I’m the only one who came out without a scratch, so my skills are better than his, amigo!’ and looking for clients.”

“That little wench... I’ll kill her... I’m gonna *kill* her...!”

Laz Smith.

Or as he called himself, Gunmeister Smith: the blacksmith who creates genius snipers.

Not only was this a long name, *meister* (artisan) and *smith* (blacksmith) were confusing, so nobody actually called him by that name. However, the hitman had asked the town’s delinquents to spread the rumor that everyone did.

According to the man himself: “I think it sounds impressive... I wield all sorts of guns. Meaning that for every gun I pick up, I’ve created a new sharpshooter for that gun. That’s why it’s ‘Gunmeister Smith,’ not ‘Gunsmith’...” But most people stopped listening to his explanation partway through.

For some reason, the explanation had impressed Graham (“I see... Wow!”), and he’d helped spread the rumor.

At the beginning of that year, Smith had joined a few other hitmen and picked a fight with the Gandor Family, and on top of severely injuring both his legs, they’d broken his face.

As a result, he’d been hospitalized for more than half a year and had finally managed to get himself discharged.

That aside, while Smith was ready to kill his former ally, Graham was over the moon at this encounter with one of his few mentors in life. He got up from his chair and spoke cheerfully, dexterously spinning his wrench in one hand.

“Ahh... What a happy day this is! Not only did I find a simpatico drinking buddy, I got to run into you, Smith! If this keeps up, is my brother Ladd gonna bust outta the big house and drop by for a visit pretty soon?! Whaddaya think, Smith?!”

“Ladd, huh...? We aren’t on the best of terms.”

Apparently, Smith already knew the man; as he remembered his face, his eyebrows drew together.

“Yeah. When my brother Ladd sees guys like you, chief, he heads right over to bump ’em off! You’re only still here because you helped us out, I bet.”

“I don’t plan to go down that easy.”

With a brief chuckle, Smith opened one half of his coat, showing them the inside.

Beneath that coat were multiple holsters, and even at a casual glance, there seemed to be more than ten handguns in there. There were even shotguns hanging from it.

“Whoooooa, damn! That’s real swell, Smith! Hey, nice job not getting hauled in by the cops even though they took you to the hospital!”

“Dr. Fred doesn’t seem to care about that sort of thing. He kept ’em under my bed for me the whole time... After so much time sitting around, it took me a full day to clean them.”

As they looked at the coat, Graham’s eyes shone, and beside him, Elmer gave an appreciative “Wow...”

“Hmm? By the way, who is this?”

“Oh, lemme introduce you! This guy’s Elmer, my benefactor and the savior of the world!”

“...The savior of the world?”

“From what he tells me, it’s his goal in life to make everyone in the world smile,” Graham said. There was no scorn in his eyes, only genuine admiration.

“Is he a clown? Does he earn money making jokes?”

“No, really! His big project is to make every single person on the planet smile at the same time! It sounds tougher than world domination! Pretty keen, huh?!”

Smith thought hard for a little while, then slowly spoke. “Oho... He’s another fine lunatic. Keh-keh... However, if he’s trapped by lunacy, then he’s like me. Risking your own life to make people happy or kill them or what have you—only people caught by insanity can do any of that.”

“Whoa... You’ve still got that philosophy, huh, chief?!”

Graham’s eyes shone like a little kid’s, while beside him, Elmer smiled and nodded eagerly.

“Yes, you’re right! People do call me crazy quite a lot. This friend of mine, Huey, has said it about three hundred times already. If lunacy is your philosophy, though, that’s terrific.”

“Keh-keh... I see you have a good head on your shoulders. Huey—the name reminds me of that terrorist they arrested last year.”

“Actually, I think we’re probably talking about the same person.”

“Keh-keh... Ridiculous. No, a true lunatic would think it was the truth, wouldn’t he? A man attempting to cover the world in smiles, friends with a terrorist friend... Are you mad, or are you sane? Or simply delusional... Either way, you show promise.”

Even though the word *terrorist* had come up several times, the mood at the table was somehow still cheerful. Looking at it, Shaft and the others all began to put their hands to their foreheads.

(“Oh, come on... Smith’s still doin’ this?”)

("Yeah, I wish he wouldn't go on about lunacy in public. It's embarrassing to watch.")

("Not to mention the thirty guns in his coat.")

("He's tough, though.")

("He ain't bad.")

("Except he lost to the Gandor execs.")

("I hear that coat weighs just about sixty-six pounds.")

("Loony is right.")

("Well, Graham does love people who go against the grain.")

("He's basically a kid.")

("Yeah, it's a problem!")

("Can't believe that Elmer fella is following the conversation.")

("I guess freaks of a feather really do flock together.")

("Wait, did he say he's friends with a terrorist? Really?")

("Can't be... It's gotta be a joke, right?")

("Well, whichever it is, it's probably safer not to bring it up too much.")

Without even noticing that Shaft and the others were whispering among themselves...Smith abruptly turned serious, and he took several guns out of his coat and began to line them up on the table.

"Kid Graham, you said you wanted a few guns, right? Take 'em."

"Let me tell you a joyous, happy story! Are you sure, chief?! I can really have these?!" Graham's expression of delight was unusually concise.

Smith closed his eyes and launched into a lecture. "You may... Listen, Graham. The very existence of guns is lunacy. Picking one up means

infusing the bullets with your own sanity; with every shot, a little more of it slips away. Understand that—”

Partway through, he opened his eyes, then broke off.

“...What are you doing?”

What had happened while he was talking?

The parts of each neatly disassembled gun were scattered all over the table.

“Ahh, happiness! I never knew such happiness could exist! I’ve always wanted to cut loose and take apart a gun at least... And so many different kinds at once— I haven’t felt so fulfilled in ages! My heart is so full, I don’t even know what to do with it! Yes, I do! I should give thanks! Thank you... Thank you so much, Smith!”

“You—... You little punk, you took apart five guns in just a couple of—! Dammit, I wondered why you kept saying you wanted a gun! This was it?!”

Looking at the pile of useless tiny components, Smith reached out toward it, trembling.

Shaft and the others gulped, watching Smith and Graham uneasily, wondering if tragedy was about to erupt here.

Then Smith grabbed the components with his fingers—

“Dammit, Graham! If you wanted to break them down, you should’ve told me! I thought it was odd. You’re all about that wrench, but you started saying you wanted a gun! So this is what that was about...! Still, Kid Graham, your wrecking arm is top-notch, as always. The components aren’t scratched up at all. Heaven’s sake. Your skills are lunacy.”

“Chief, when you say I’m crazy, it feels like a compliment. It’s all embarrassing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” By the time Smith had retorted with a disapproving tut, he’d reassembled one of the guns.

“Huh?”

Shaft’s group looked at one another.

Less than a minute ago, that gun had definitely been broken down into plain old scrap metal, its parts mixed with the components of other guns.

Right now, it was as whole as it had been before Graham had dismantled it and was disappearing into Smith’s coat again.

While the delinquents were still busy being startled, the second gun came back together.

Stowing that one in his coat as well, Smith went on in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Just so you know, if I hadn’t gotten careless, I wouldn’t have lost to the Gandors, either. Something really is wrong with them. I thought I was no match for them at the time—but if I’d kept my cool, I could’ve won.”

“Then why’d you let ’em win? ...Am I allowed to ask that? Hmm, but that question might hurt you or upset you. Should I be a grown-up and not ask, then? ...What do you think, Smith?”

“...The way you talk is as irritating as ever, you little pest. Dammit, I was careless because...I was spooked, I guess you could say. I mean, you know, they’re immortal— Ah, never mind. Forget it. When you live long enough, you’re bound to run into at least one thing you just can’t explain. Especially if deep in the underbelly of society.”

He’d finished two guns while he was talking, and now only the components of the final gun were left. He picked them up with his fingertips, juggling them in his hands like beanbags.

As if each piece had a life of its own, they slipped back into the places where they belonged, one after another. Of course, when that gun was finished—there wasn't a single component left on the table.

"That's just like you... Let me tell you a story that's just like you. You put the guns I'd taken apart back together so easily... Smith, your lunacy would make even the polar bears at the South Pole freeze up!" Graham cried.

"True. And I was already impressed that polar bears came all the way from the North Pole to the South Pole to see Smith's technique!" Elmer added with honest admiration.

Meanwhile, Shaft and the others reacted as if they'd just seen a magic trick, then shook their heads in resignation.

("...I really can't keep up with nutjobs.")

("You said it.")

("But we're following Graham, aren't we?")

("Does that mean we're a buncha nutjobs, too?")

("Life just doesn't pay off, does it...?")

Despite the negativity, Graham kept cheerfully chatting with his new friend and almost-mentor, whom he hadn't seen in a while.

That said, Smith kept standing the whole time, even when he drank his liquor. As he explained, "I can't sit down with all these guns under my coat."

"Now then...", said Smith after some time, "I'm glad I got to check up on you, Kid Graham. I guess I'll be on my way."

"Aw, c'mon, Smith. You could hang out a little longer."

"No... I've got a job immediately after this."

"When you just got out of the hospital? You really are nuts, chief."

“That’s what I keep telling you.”

Smith grinned and pulled his hat down low on his head, apparently enjoying himself immensely.

“If there’s anyone sane in the murder business, I’d love to see him.”



One hour later An abandoned building somewhere in New York

“.....”

After leaving Graham’s group, Smith shifted into his “hitman” state of mind.

He was on an avenue near Grand Central Station. Among the buildings lining the street, there was one that was surprisingly unoccupied.

Inside, it was neater than he’d expected, and there was hardly any dust at all.

However, the interior was unfinished, and lines had been drawn here and there with paint.

What were those lines for?

As he studied them curiously—a gloomy voice spoke behind him.

“They’re planning to tear this building down soon.”

“.....”

“Beg pardon. Mr. Smith...I presume?”

Smith nodded slowly, and the man shook his head with relief.

“Ah, my apologies. I’m sorry for asking you to meet me at a place like this.”

“.....”

As Smith kept a wordless eye on him, the man quietly went on. “I can’t thank you enough. Even if it was on the introduction of the Runorata Family, I’m very grateful you’d come here for a nobody like me.”

His tone was courteous, but deep down, he was afraid of the hitman. At least, that was how it sounded to Smith.

The perfect job to mark his comeback seemed to be on its way in. Hidden behind the collar of his long coat, the gunmeister quietly spoke. “Let’s see... Shall I do something to prove my skills and set your mind at ease?”

“Oh, no, no, that won’t be necessary.” The man hastily waved his hands—then added, “After all, even a child could do it, as long as he’s willing to kill this person so I don’t have to.”

“What...?”

Smith suspected the comment was a veiled insult, but remembering how he’d lost his cool before, he locked the rising darkness inside himself.

“I see... So who do you want me to kill...*Mr. Fledgling Star Journalist?*”

“Oh dear. The Runoratas told you about that?” The man—Lester—heaved a big sigh, then did his best to keep his trembling under control as he continued. “Well... The thing is, I’d like you to kill the person who made me famous.”

“What?”

Every syllable Lester spoke was heavy and sharp.

Almost like hedgehog quills meant to protect him.

“Ice Pick Thompson... I want you to get rid of him—before the cops catch him.”

CHAPTER 8

**Ice Pick Thompson's face
looms out of the darkness**



CHAPTER 8: Ice Pick Thompson's face looms out of the darkness

New York Little Italy

"...Rain, huh?" Carl muttered, looking up at the sky.

As he was heading back toward the *Daily Days* office in Chinatown, he'd begun to feel cold drops on his skin.

"Well, damn. I guess I should've gone home first today." Grumbling to himself, Carl walked briskly in the direction of the newspaper.

"Pete's sake, rain again..."

The residual heat had made for a warm summer night. The rain brought coolness, but at the same time, it inflicted an indescribably oppressive feeling. And when a murderer was active in New York only on rainy days, that oppressiveness was particularly intense.

As he walked through town, though, Carl didn't appear all that bothered by it.

Lester... He really does know something.

Remembering the man he'd met a little earlier just before going to the Gandors' office, Carl looked up at the dark sky. Despite the raindrops striking his face, he glared at the starless expanse.

It's probably safe to assume the real criminal has ties to that incident.

At first, I thought it might be Lester himself, but...

"He really was spooked. Afraid of a killer who's after his life," he muttered to himself—then suddenly realized something.

So I am being tailed.

He'd noticed someone following him a little while ago—but even though it had started to rain, the figure showed no sign of moving faster.

Ice Pick Thompson... Nah, couldn't be. I can't get careless, though.

It could be Lester, come to bump him off for knowing *his secret*.

On that thought, in the middle of a deserted street—Carl quietly turned around.

“Care to speak face-to-face?”

His voice was quiet, but it carried weight. He'd had several near brushes with death in his work as a journalist, and he'd been tailed like this more than a few times before.

He'd developed the ability to tell at a glance how dangerous most people were. He was aware that that was the very reason why he'd been able to talk with Graham so boldly.

If he'd been dealing with Ladd Russo—Carl probably wouldn't even have shown up at the meeting spot. It was doubtful whether he'd have done the interview in the first place.

But the current situation was difficult to judge.

After making sure there were several open speakeasies nearby where he could hide if necessary, he'd chosen to hail his opponent from this position, at this distance.

There was no telling what terror might present itself.

Tensing slightly, he watched to see what the figure that had been tailing him would do—

—when the person who emerged from the shadows on the street was only a boy.

“...?” Carl frowned.

When there were about fifteen feet between them, the boy stopped.

Is he just a thief? No, this doesn't feel right for that.

As Carl watched suspiciously, the boy took a slow step toward him.

"Mister? Are you...an information broker?"

"...I don't know who told you that, but... Well, I suppose I am."

"I'd like to buy some information from you."

"What?" As Carl grew more suspicious, the boy quietly went on.



“Please tell me...about the people who don’t die...

“And—*where I can find a man named Szilard Quates.*”



Meanwhile

“Let me tell you a fun, fun story. It’s started raining.”

“What’s so fun about that?” Shaft muttered, annoyed by the pelting raindrops.

Graham seemed rather appalled.

“Hey, it *is* fun! Ahhh, it really is! Just when I was thinking it was so very, very hot, the blessed rain falls! If the rain gets us wet, it’s enough to bring our temperatures down! When you think of it that way, maybe the rain’s a protective barrier the sky has given us to shield us from the sun! How do I respond to that, Shaft?! Earth loves us!”

“Uh, it’s night, so the sun’s got nothing to do with anything.”

“Ridiculous... We wouldn’t even have these nighttime temperatures without the heat of the sun during the day, all right? The whole atmosphere stored it all up, just for you. You should be grateful.”

“Aaaaaaah, this is why I hate idiots who know their stuff...”

While Shaft was at his wit’s end, Elmer beamed as he walked beside Graham.

“You’re right. The atmosphere is amazing, isn’t it? Earth is so incredible. I think we’re lucky just to be living on it. If we could share the rain with people in desert regions so they could have more food, would more people be happy just to be living here on Earth...? Well, right now, all of you are experiencing this planet firsthand, so go ahead and smile.”

In a way, what Elmer said wasn't exactly fair, but Graham seemed convinced.

"I see... Yeah, we're lucky we can breathe, all right. Hey, everybody, smile!"

"This is completely hopeless. They're like two gears that mesh perfectly with each other and no one else...!"

Without letting Shaft's lament bother him, Graham turned to Elmer.

"By the way, I don't mind helping you look for this Mark kid, but what do you want him for?"

Having found a kindred spirit in Elmer, Graham had started his grandstanding. "If we ask the delinquents around town, we'll find that kid, easy!" he'd said.

And now here they were, helping hunt for him at night.

"Sure he isn't already home and in bed?" one of Graham's friends asked.

But Elmer's reply was a little odd. "If we can, I'd like to search for him now... It looks like rain." He even said he'd try looking by himself if necessary.

The upshot was that they'd split up and were now searching the town.

This particular team consisted of Elmer, Graham, and Shaft. As the only member who had any common sense, Shaft had been forced to listen to their ridiculous conversation for the past little while, and he had made his annoyance known multiple times.

But finally, they had gotten to the key point—"Why are you looking for that boy?"—and Shaft perked up, hoping the conversation was going somewhere at last, but...the answer that came back was a strange one.

“Right... The thing is, *I want to know whether he can be happy.*”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?” Graham set his wrench against his cheek, cocking his head.

“Well, let’s see. I’m guessing at some of what I’m about to say, so take it with a grain of salt and don’t tell anybody else, all right?”

Speaking calmly, Elmer gave his answer.



“You say you want to buy information...?” Frowning, Carl gazed at the boy in front of him. “I don’t know how you know Szilard’s name, but... Sorry, but I’m in business, too. I can’t release information without getting more information or a fee in return.”

“I have information.”

In the rain, the boy’s face looked rather mature.

In it, Carl sensed an odd sort of pressure.

What’s going on?

A thrill ran through him, warning of danger. The only reason he didn’t cut and run right then was because he didn’t sense that the boy intended to kill him.

“Who...are you...?” Carl asked dubiously.

Quietly, the boy murmured, “This is what I can give you—”

The next thing he knew, there was something in the boy’s right hand. It was so thin and sharp it was almost invisible in the rain, except for its dull silver gleam.

As Carl realized it was a rusty ice pick, the boy gave a calm but heavy reply.

“The identity of Ice Pick Thompson... Will that be enough?”



“There’s something I want to know,” Elmer told Graham and Shaft. It was an answer neither of them had seen coming at all.

“I want to know whether a suicidal serial killer can end up happy.”



Meanwhile

Even after Lester had gone, Smith stayed in the building, taking shelter from the rain. Looking at the note he’d been handed, he sounded rather troubled as he muttered to himself.

“...Well, this has gotten ugly. To think my comeback job would be a kid.”

The note held the physical description and address of a boy named Mark. Crumpling it in his fist, he considered his options for a little while.

Before long, he shook his head in resignation, then grinned.

“I knew it. Nobody on this side of society is sane.”

Chuckling, the man began checking the bullets in the guns in his coat, one by one.

“In that case—I’ll just have to let my own lunacy guide me.”

The rain was still falling over the dark city, drowning out the scraping of the guns against one another in its own quiet sibilance.

Szt, szt—

Sst, sst...

Interlude

Rain.

It had all begun on a rainy day. The falling drops were the only ones who knew the whole story, but they had burst against the ground and disappeared.

He could hear many people.

He could hear many voices.

Even through the sound of the cold rain, he could hear them.

A group of irritated men were talking to one another.

Find him? Not here.

He has to be here. That can't be right.

Look over there. Check over here. Find him.

It's just one lousy brat. Let's leave him. There's no time.

If he's not here, that means he didn't see, right?

Even if he saw, what can he do?

He's just a kid. True. He didn't see our faces, either.

They reached his ears along with the rain: irritated voices, anxious voices, relaxed voices.

As he hid in the closet, all the boy could do was listen.

He couldn't hear the one voice he wanted to hear—his mother's.

Could the faint scream he'd heard earlier have been hers?

That day...

...robbers had taken away the boy's mother from him.

The first attacker ran a small speakeasy.

The second owned a real estate office.

The third was an active police officer.

The fourth operated a rental warehouse.

And the fifth was—

—a young reporter.

Nearly two years passed, and then...

...a boy who'd sworn vengeance met an immortal monster...

...and a reporter who feared death was reunited with a killer.

**Mark
Wilmens
lets his
bloodstained
malice
smolder
in the
rain**

CHAPTER 9



CHAPTER 9: Mark Wilmens lets his bloodstained malice smolder in the rain

Wsssh-wsssh, wsssh-wsssh, wsssh-wsssh...

With no hesitation whatsoever, the rain dyed the town a different color, and the darkness a colder shade of gray.

Carl and the boy were drenched with the raindrops, but even then, they didn't move.

Despite the hot and humid season, standing in the rain at night wasn't pleasant.

But the two of them had better things to worry about than their discomfort.

One of them was a newshound who was approaching middle age. The other was a boy who appeared younger than fifteen.

Neither one of them seemed suited to such high tension, but the short line of dark red and silver extending from the boy's hand had made it possible.

Blade wasn't the word for it—it was an ice pick just a few inches long. But it was the link binding them together.

As the sound of the rain seemed ready to wash them from existence—the reporter was the first to speak.

"Ice Pick Thompson's identity..."

He didn't sense any immediate danger from the boy, but there was a determined, quiet, and very unchildlike look in his eyes.

The boy simply listened to Carl—the journalist, the information broker.

"You're saying...it's you?"

“Yes.”

“.....”

That was impossible to believe—or so he would have said, if he were an ordinary reporter.

A reporter with sharp instincts might have been able to sense that the boy was the real deal simply from the look in his eyes.

However, Carl’s situation was different. He’d already been aware of the possibility that the criminal was a child.

The evidence was in the wounds thought to have been inflicted first.

Every one of them had come from below, in an upward thrust. Even strikes to the heart left similar wounds, and one theory proposed that the killer had only been able to attack from that angle.

Then there was the fact that Graham’s gang of delinquents was among the suspects, and the idea that one of the shorter members had disguised himself as a kid to get in close to the victims.

And the other rumor that they might be using an actual boy.

This information was technically only known to the police, but Carl had gotten ahold of it, too. On top of that, he personally had different intel.

It was something known only to a few people at the *Daily Days* newspaper: *what the victims all had in common*.

“You wouldn’t happen to be...?” Through the rain, Carl looked straight at the boy. “Can I ask your name?”

“...Mark. Mark Wilmens.”

“I thought so... You’re Paula Wilmens’s son?”

“.....” At the name, for just a moment, light returned to the boy’s eyes. “You know my mother?”

“So I was right. I didn’t think it was possible—and after I published that ridiculous moniker, I was hoping Ice Pick Thompson wouldn’t turn out to be a boy like you, but...”

“...Answer me.”

“It would be easy to just say yes, but... Let me ask you a question. Do you know what it is your mother was doing in this town?”

At that solemn inquiry, the boy fell silent for a little while.

The darkness surfaced in his eyes again, and there was no emotion in his voice as he answered.

“She was a hooker. But only on the surface.” As if he were spitting out an unpleasant memory, he said, “Szilard Quates... I know she was hiding something because a man by that name told her to.”

“.....”

“And they... They killed her.”



November 1930

It began with the doorbell.

The boy hadn’t heard that sound in several months. *It’s a customer*, he thought, and he went to answer the door himself, to save his mother the trouble.

But Paula’s hands had taken hold of his wrist and covered his mouth.

They were gentle, but he could feel a slight anxious tremble.

Impulsively, the boy’s mother hid him in the closet. “Don’t make a sound. No matter what happens.”

That was all she said, and then she shut the door.

She was smiling the way she always did, and Mark wasn't particularly wary or afraid. He just smiled brightly back at her and nodded, resolving to do as she'd said.

That was the right answer, and it was also the wrong one.

The boy stayed hidden in the closet, and so he survived.

But at the same time—he lost his mother.

After the men's voices had gone, the boy kept waiting for her, but she never appeared.

How long was he supposed to stay in that closet?

He couldn't completely believe the deception, but he repeated it in his mind, silently, over and over.

He'd been doing that ever since he first heard the men's voices to keep the explosion of fear in his heart under control. He knew this was serious.

He was afraid that acknowledging the unease would make it real and release it upon him.

Still, no matter how the boy tried to fool himself, reality was not so kind.

Dawn broke, but his mother didn't come.

The sun set again.

It rose on a new morning. She still wasn't there.

The boy had stayed in the closet for nearly two full days when he was found by a swarm of police officers after the landlord let them in.

When the boy was dragged out of the closet, all they told him...

...was that his mother's body had been found on the banks of the Hudson.



Returning to the present

“My mom’s body was really pretty.”

The boy’s eyes were very, very dark, but there was something tranquil in them.

“Except for the fact that she’d been riddled with holes with scorch marks around them.”

When the corpse had been pulled out of the river, it had clearly been abused—had been put through a graphic execution.

The vivid evidence of the process by which her life had been taken had been carved into her corpse, impossible to ignore.

The day he confirmed it was her body, it was raining.

A few days later, a certain major newspaper had put a neat bow on the incident as “drug related,” and it had been raining then, too, just like this.

He didn’t believe his mother had been involved in the drug trade.

But even the police said that multiple witnesses had appeared, and the newspaper had reported it with confidence.

It was as if they were sacrificing the victim instead—as an excuse for their own failure to unmask the true culprit.

How much of the boy’s past did he know?

Carl lowered his eyes and kept his voice neutral. “I’m familiar with that article.”

“How about that... I’m impressed; that paper was just about the only one that ran anything on it.”

“...It’s complicated.”

I really shouldn't tell him I used to be with that paper. Or that I know the guy who wrote that article.

Keeping his eyes down so that the boy wouldn't catch on, Carl decided to listen to the rest of his story.

"It was raining. The rain wasn't anything special; it was just like it is now."

The boy spun the ice pick in his hand, taking a step closer to the reporter.

Carl didn't move. He still didn't sense that the boy intended to harm him.

Thinking it was worth trying to part his opponent from that ice pick, at least, he directed a very natural question at the boy. "I don't suppose you'd put that thing away, would you?"

After a moment's silence, the boy apologized.

"...I'm sorry."

"I see."

"If I let this go, I'll... I won't be brave enough to talk. I feel like I'll stop being me."

The boy's eyes were *murky* and *hollow*.

Carl's long years of reporting experience alerted him to that fact.

At the very least, the emotion wasn't normal. Carl could easily imagine him screaming something irrational and striking out of the blue; he was probably more dangerous than Graham's group of delinquents had been yesterday.

Yet Carl chose to keep listening.

Was it simply interest regarding "Ice Pick Thompson"?

Did he feel responsible for having given him that name?

Or—had he sensed something odd in the boy’s confession?

Either way, Carl didn’t avoid the rain or the boy’s gaze. He just let the chill seep into him.

“I think I know why you’re after Szilard now.”

“.....”

“Ice Pick Thompson’s victims have one thing in common.”

Was he trying to even the mental playing field?

The boy hadn’t asked, but Carl quietly gave him an answer.

“They were all—*pawns of the pawns* of Szilard Quates.”

“.....”

“Let’s set aside the question of Szilard himself. We know for a fact that he had several flunkies in political, judicial, and financial positions, right up to police Superintendent Veld, who was forced to resign after an embezzlement scandal... He used them to achieve a certain objective.”

In the rain, the information broker began to reveal his wares to the silent boy.

The boy realized the man’s gaze was steady—and simultaneously, he understood that a deal had been struck. He’d been acknowledged.

If they’d come to an agreement about the sale of information...

...it meant the other man had definitely acknowledged him as Ice Pick Thompson.

I can’t go back.

The boy quietly took a breath. The air, lukewarm from the rain, collected in his throat, but he didn’t feel it would go all the way to the bottom of his lungs.

Not that it matters, though. After all...I’m going to die. I have to die.

Mark's throat was on the verge of trembling slightly. He tensed it, forcing the air into his belly all at once.

Then, in a rather dismal tone, he said, "...I already know."

"In that case, what more do you want? What will you do if you learn Szilard's whereabouts? If you're planning to kill him... The reason is confidential, so I can't say why, but I will tell you it's not possible... In several ways."

Was he trying to talk the boy around, or was it a challenge?

Whichever it was, Carl simply related the facts. Of course, as he did so, he was hiding one key fact.

"Nothing in particular."

At the boy's simple answer, however, Carl's eyebrows drew together, and he fell silent.

Mark shook his head wearily. His eyes still clouded, he glared at the puddles by his feet.

"Szilard Quates... I was just curious to know a little more about him, since they took Mom's life and her honor because of him... So where is he?"

"He's not in New York, I can tell you that."

"What's that supposed to mean? That's pretty vague."

"I told you, remember? It's confidential."

Carl's expression had hardened somewhat, and the boy cocked his head slightly, closing the distance between them a little more.

He tightened his grip on the ice pick. "...Is the information I gave you not enough?" he asked, his gaze as heavy and cold as the bottom of the ocean.

Carl quietly shook his head, and his eyes were *even colder and sharper* as he glared back.

“Kid, don’t sell us information brokers short. Who do you think we are at the *Daily Days*?”

“...?”

“If we sold confidential information on the cheap *just because a mysterious killer came forward and introduced himself*, we’d go out of business... In that case, if a guy wanted information, the quickest way to get it would be to murder someone. Of course, a hitman as notorious in the underworld as Vino would be a different story.”

“What...are you talking about? Who’d kill people for information...?” Mark took a step back in spite of himself; even with the rain between them, he could sense Carl’s overwhelmingly intimidating aura.

Carl spoke firmly. “Listen, kid. In this world, people who’d kill for information are just as common as people who’d kill for revenge.”

“.....”

“Remember this: You don’t need revenge as an excuse to kill somebody. People can kill over a piece of bread, or for the sheer fun of it.”

As the boy fell silent, Carl explained almost as if he were speaking to his own son.

“But the reverse is also true—some people won’t kill over bread, and some wouldn’t even kill for revenge. I don’t know which type you’ll end up being, but... Anyway, regarding Szilard, you’re not likely to have any more points of contact with him than you do now. I can’t say any more than that.”

“What about the monsters who don’t die?”

“...I dunno if they’re the same as the beings I’m familiar with, but... I’m sorry. That’s confidential, too.”

The boy gazed at Carl with those murky eyes for a while. Finally, he slid the ice pick he'd been holding into his sleeve, then turned his back on the other man.

"...Thank you very much. There's nothing else I need to ask you."

"You're sure you don't have to shut me up?"

His ironic question was partially drowned out by the rain.

The boy stopped for a moment and spoke in a somewhat milder voice than before.

"Yeah."

Then, with a smile that was somehow self-deprecating—

"I'm... I'm done," he told him. "Besides, I have nothing against you. Killing for anything other than revenge...*was too much for me.*"

"?"

Carl picked up on something ominous in those words, as well as the boy's determination, and he asked another question.

"What do you mean? And also... *What are you going to do about the last member of that group?*"

"...That's none of your business."

That was all the boy said, and then he ran off into the rain.

"Wait!" Carl tried to stop him, but to no avail. The boy faded into the downpour, and before long, he'd disappeared entirely.

As Carl watched the small figure vanish, he murmured quietly:

"I'll be damned. I'm surprised he didn't kill me. I just bluffed on an impulse."

The rainwater that trickled down from his head camouflaged his nervous sweat. Quietly, he commented to himself:

“Well, well—should I consider that conversation a win or a loss? ...I wonder. In terms of information, I got more than I gave.”

Carl shook his head, sighed heavily, and looked down.

“Well. I’ll have to give him his *change* someday...”

A few minutes later...

Still, maybe I’m losing my touch. Way back when, that wouldn’t even have given me a thrill.

Carl ambled along through the rain, taking his time. He was already wet; it made no difference at this point.

If Donna was alive, she’d be about that boy’s age.

As he remembered his departed daughter, the newshound’s brazen face wore a complicated expression.

All right. What should I do now?

Ordinarily, the thing to do would be to call the cops, but...that conversation was technically with a client.

Besides...he never said, I am Ice Pick Thompson. You couldn’t call that testimony.

Henry or Nicholas would probably call it exclusive information and be over the moon about it. Elean might tell the boy to turn himself in, or at least try to talk him out of his revenge.

...Should I ask the vice president or the president for advice?

.....

What do I want to do?

Remembering his daughter’s death had made Carl just a little sentimental. The rain had cooled his head off, and he needed to warm it up again. For now, he decided to make for the newspaper.

Still, I never thought that kid was Ice Pick Thompson. I guessed wrong. And after all that crowing in front of Graham’s crew, telling

them I had an idea who the real culprit was. That's embarrassing. Well, I didn't give any names, so it's all—

For a moment, his thoughts cut out.

His mind was wide awake, but his train of thought had been forcibly broken off as a gentle shock ran through his back.

Did I just get stabbed?!

The tension of the past few minutes may not have completely worn off; Carl's nerves spiked all at once. He turned to look—

—but it was only an illusion. The silver object that had connected with his back was not nearly as precise as an ice pick.

“How curious... Let me tell you a curious story,” murmured the rain-soaked young man holding that enormous silver weapon—a wrench of the type used in demolition work. “I poked you in the back with my wrench, just to scare you a little. Why were you so startled? You acted like I stabbed you... What do you think, Shaft?”

The young man in the drenched blue coveralls, Graham Specter, turned to the friend behind him, who was holding an umbrella.

“Probably figured you had him at gunpoint,” Shaft answered impassively.

“Or you only meant to poke him. Maybe you actually did stab him.”

Behind Graham, Shaft was standing next to another young man Carl didn't know. He was wearing an easygoing smile.

“Hmm...,” Graham mused. “Then all I can do is make an assumption that splits the difference between your guesses.”

“So the worst possible answer, then.”

Possibly because he hadn't been able to hear Shaft's retort, Graham began brooding, twirling his wrench.

“Which means...our journalist friend was startled because he thought he had just been stabbed with a gun. I see... Yeah, that’s quite a scare, all right! I’d jump out of my skin, too! The blunt, unassuming muzzle of a gun sinking slowly into my back... That’s a magic trick right out of a horror show! Help me out, here, Shaft... I’m gonna lose sleep over this.”

“What scares me is that you believe every word you’re saying, Mr. Graham.”

As Shaft covered his face with his free hand, Graham spun back toward Carl and kept talking.

“Well, I’m real sorry I did that to you, Mr. Journalist. I’m even sorrier that I don’t remember your name. You don’t mind if I just keep calling you Mr. Journalist, do ya?!”

“It’s Carl,” the reporter responded as his heart rate slowly returned to normal.

The wrench Graham was spinning stopped dead, and he pivoted back to face Shaft again.

“What now, Shaft? Does this mean he rejected my nickname?”

“He’s rejecting *you*.”

“Oh... I can see that. After all, I realized I was the enemy of the world this afternoon. It’s perfectly normal for your enemies to reject you... But I’m sad. How can I shake this sadness?”

The smiling man who stood beside Shaft answered Graham’s broken question.

“If you just decide to have fun for now, I think the sadness will probably go away. So come on and smile!”

“Hmm... Good answer. But aren’t some things fun and sad at the same time?”

“You could just stop being sad and focus on having fun, couldn’t you?”

“Is it okay to be that happy? Wouldn’t people become so very happy that they forget to move forward and eventually die out?”

Graham’s vague worries could have been deep or shallow, but Elmer kept right on smiling at him.

“If everyone’s happy as they die out, what’s the harm?”

“If everybody was happy, wouldn’t that be the same as unhappiness?”

“As long as they don’t think it’s unhappy, it wouldn’t matter, would it?”

“I see... Good answer.”

Feeling alarmed by the increasingly bizarre trajectory of this conversation, Shaft intervened with a shout.

“It’s a terrible answer! What the hell are you people thinking?!”

Still wet with rain, watching a conversation that was nothing like the one he’d had moments earlier, Carl thought, *Was that boy truly real?*

Or was he just a phantom he’d seen because he was pursuing Ice Pick Thompson?

Even as the doubts came over his mind, Carl pulled himself together and asked the young men in front of him a question.

“Beg pardon; I was a little flustered, that’s all... And? What brings you out here?”

“Well, Mr. Journali... gnrgh...*Carl*, we saw you walking out here in the rain by your lonesome, and we wondered why. Did you have a run-in with an umbrella thief?”

“Oh... Thanks for your concern. I just felt like getting rained on... And I can’t help but notice you don’t have an umbrella, either. Even though the two behind you do.”

Carl smiled a little at Graham, who was as drenched as he was.

Graham responded with a supremely confident expression. “I’m getting ready to take on the sun.”

“...?”

As Carl’s smile turned confused, Shaft hastily waved a hand.

“Uh, Carl, just ignore anything this guy says. This one time, he said he’d spin that wrench over his head and knock the rain away. He ended up getting soaked.”

“Kept dry for about ten seconds, though.” Graham crossed his arms, looking disappointed.

Carl smiled dryly at him. “Anyway, what are you boys doing? Don’t tell me you’re out looking for the real Ice Pick Thompson.”

The young man’s answer brought all the tension back.

“Yep, that’s the one!” Graham declared, nodding vigorously. “We promised we wouldn’t tell anyone, so I can’t say who it is! But apropos of nothing, Carl, have you seen a kid who comes up to my chest around here? Nothin’ really special about him, but... Uh, Elmer, what was the kid’s name again?”

“Mark.”

The man he’d called Elmer answered with a smile, and Graham turned back to Carl, spinning his wrench.

“Yeah! Mark. He’s not easy to pick out of a crowd, but... Oh, right! He might have an ice pick or something, so that’ll count!”



Thirty minutes later In an apartment somewhere in New York
The old building still looked the way it had decades ago.
Opening the door of one of its apartments, Mark returned to the
place he called home.
The apartment he'd shared with his mother had been bigger.
However, when his mother had been killed, he'd begun living
carefully on what she'd left him.
Even if he was just one boy, the inheritance had been large enough
for him to live on for several years—and that fact had fueled
suspicions that she'd been peddling dope.
He knew that it was probably too late to clear her name now,
though.
The people who'd killed his mother hadn't been satisfied with taking
her life. They'd stolen her honor as well.
The boy couldn't let them get away with it.
So when he'd heard the truth from "her"—
—when he'd learned why his mother had been murdered and the
names of her killers—
—he'd resolved to take revenge.
He didn't care what hell it would bring him.
He'd polished up a rusty ice pick he'd found discarded behind a
tavern. Taking his time, the boy had spied on the killers, calmly
learning their habits and keeping the fires of revenge burning in his
heart.
At times when the rain fell hard enough to hide the whole city—just
as it had when his mother had been raped and murdered—the boy
had quietly acted on his dark intent.

Nonetheless, by then he was thinking of his own death.

Even though his revenge wasn't yet complete.

There was still one person who hadn't yet been punished, but reluctance was growing deep in his gut amid the fury.

"I'm not afraid of dying... I'm not scared to die."

The boy repeated the words to himself as he left the entryway and headed deeper into the apartment. He tried to recall the resolve he'd felt when he'd decided to jump off the bridge.

At the same time—he remembered the immortal man who'd held him back.

Come to think of it, how did he notice me?

In the heavy rain, nobody had seen him standing there on the edge of the bridge, preparing to jump. As a matter of fact, quite a few people had crossed that bridge while he was there, but he didn't think he'd been seen.

And the one who noticed me, the one who stopped me, was an immortal monster, of all things.

He felt the terrible irony in that.

From the way the information broker had spoken, the "immortal monster" wasn't a daydream. It actually existed.

But even revealing his own identity hadn't been enough to get the information he wanted. The boy had decided there was nothing else he could do. He shook his head hard, erasing all thoughts of the man from it.

That's right. Either way, I have to die.

"I'm not afraid of dying."

Repeating the same words a few times, like a magic spell, he sat down in a small chair and finished the sentence.

“But...not until I kill one more, one more...”

Suddenly, he heard a noise from the entryway.

It was the sound of the lock being turned from the inside, startlingly clear.

Flinching, the boy looked toward the door.

From the shadows, a tall figure emerged. The voice that spoke to him was cold.

“You’re not afraid to die, are you?”

“Wh-who are you?!”

He’d heard the lock turn, but he hadn’t heard the door open.

The man must have been hiding in here beforehand, then moved to the entryway when the boy came back.

In that case, he’d locked the door to cut off any help from outside.

The boy felt his pulse jump. He could feel the blood vessels at the back of his head pounding with so much pressure he thought they might burst.

In his belly, his guts were screaming as if they’d been frozen in ice.

But his mouth was silent and unmoving. He couldn’t scream. He couldn’t even breathe properly.

“What’s wrong? Why so tense?”

“.....”

Scoffing at the petrified boy, the tall intruder quietly walked toward him.

“Steeling yourself to face death isn’t the same as accepting its inevitability, you know.”

The figure looked peculiar.

He wore a hat, pulled down low, and his collar covered everything up to his mouth.

The most unnerving thing of all was how he was dressed. No matter how chilly the rain was, it was still midsummer.

But he wore a long coat that fell below his knees.

“If you’ve only steeled yourself, and death arrives when you least expect—”

The man’s face was scarred, and between that and his sharp eyes, everything suggested he was on the wrong side of the law.

The boy thought he might be connected to the Gandor Family, whom he’d visited that evening. He rose from his chair very slightly, keeping his guard up.

But...it was too late.

As the boy started to get to his feet, the man took a shotgun out of his coat and pointed it at the boy’s head.

The iron muzzle pressed against his skull, then pushed him back. The boy wasn’t fully standing, so he was knocked off-balance and forced back into his chair.

“If death comes when you didn’t expect it—you feel fear, don’t you?”

The pressure on his forehead kept the boy from standing up, in multiple senses. Carefully, he felt for the ice pick he’d hidden in his sleeve.

However, the guy in the long coat grinned, then stopped him with a word.

“Don’t do anything rash, ‘Ice Pick Thompson.’”

“...!”

“...Ha-ha! You flinched... Apparently, you really are the killer.”

“Ngh!”

A shock ran through the boy’s heart.

He knows.

How? Was it that reporter?

No. It’s too soon. The Gandor Family?

Or maybe... Don’t tell me...

Various guesses ran through his head. But in this situation, he realized, it didn’t matter whether they were conjecture or the truth—the boy managed to get his trembling throat to swallow, then forced the words out of his nearly dry mouth.

“Who... Who are you, mister? How did you know about me?”

“Oho. You’re awfully polite for someone who’s talking to a hitman. I assumed someone with a moniker like Ice Pick Thompson would be a rougher type, like the gangsters who use real machine guns, but... Well, just look at you. You seem like a good, serious kid.”

“A hitman...?”

The boy’s heart constricted at the word.

The sound of the rain echoed from outside. The same sound he’d heard when his mother was stolen from him.

He considered lunging at this unknown man, and perhaps dying in the process.

Under the circumstances, though, even a hint of such intentions would probably be enough to get him killed.

Apparently, for reasons he couldn’t fathom, the hitman didn’t intend to kill him immediately.

Deciding he'd just have to watch for an opening, the boy spoke to the man as he got his breathing back under control.

"You're...a hitman...?"

"I am. My target is Ice Pick Thompson. They generously told me your address and what you looked like, too. I doubted you were a killer, but they paid me in advance, so I had to at least investigate. Know what I mean?"

"Who the hell would've hired...?"

"No hitman alive would rat out his client. Except that rotten *amigo*-woman, maybe."

The man sounded a little irritated, and the boy was perplexed.

"...Amigo?"

For a moment, he remembered the Mexican woman he'd met at the speakeasy, but the pressure in Smith's voice soon broke up that vision.

"It's got nothing to do with you. If you don't want to die, don't say *amigo* again."

"But you're going to kill me anyway."

"Keh-keh... You've got a sound argument there—but those don't work on me. After all, this line of work was not invented anywhere near sound arguments."

The man's oddly roundabout phrasing tugged at Mark. But he kept his focus, chose his words carefully, and let the burning heat inside him come through in his voice. "Why didn't you just kill me right away?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you."

"To...talk...?"

“Indeed. Ice Pick Thompson is a symbol of insanity and terror now. If he’s going to be lost forever and end up a legend like Jack the Ripper, his identity forever buried—then I wanted to connect with the source of that insanity... That’s all. By peering into its source, I won’t be engulfed by that insanity—I’ll instead draw nearer to its purest form.”

What is this guy talking about?

Apparently, this hitman was completely drunk on himself.

Mark understood what the words meant, but he couldn’t understand why he’d be reveling in these ideas in this particular situation.

He wanted to make a comment, but with a shotgun against his forehead, he couldn’t risk upsetting the one holding it.

“Now, then. What should I ask about first? Let’s see... To begin, let’s hear about the feelings that drove you to this violence.” From what Mark could see of the hitman’s eyes between the hat and collar, he seemed to be enjoying the situation. He also seemed to pity the boy.

Mark didn’t know what to do—but when he saw that the man’s expression hadn’t so much as flickered, he gave up and decided to tell him everything.

Just as he’d done for the information broker a short while ago, he described the malice in his heart.

“I see... Revenge is an extremely natural motive. On the other hand, killing five people for the death of one may be enough to merit calling you insane.”

Once the hitman had heard the whole story, he thought for a little while.

Then, with a slight smile, hidden behind his collar, he made a brief comment to the boy he was holding at gunpoint.

“Laz Smith.”

“...Huh?”

“My name. Those who’ve been to the depths of underworld society call me Gunmeister Smith.”

“Why are you telling me your name?”

“You should know the name of the man who’s going to kill you.”

Oh, so he’s finally going to shoot me.

Steeling himself, the boy focused his whole attention on the man’s finger. The moment the trigger was pulled, maybe he could shift his head out of the way.

Except Smith’s finger wasn’t quite on the trigger, and it wasn’t moving toward it. But if Mark moved at all, the man would still be able to fire easily.

Should he act, or should he wait?

Processing his thoughts in the space of just a few seconds, in the end, the boy chose to evade by drawing out the conversation.

Technically, he knew that it might be a stupid move, but he was hoping his opponent would be even stupider.

Yet, as if he’d read the boy’s mind, the killer spoke with exquisite timing.

“I should ask, just in case. Do you have any last words?”

This was his final chance. Mark forcibly swallowed down the fear that fell over him, and with the help of the rain patter around him—he gradually transformed his heart into that of Ice Pick Thompson.

“There is...one thing that’s bothering me.”

“Speak.”

“A minute ago, you said I’d killed five people in revenge...but you’re wrong.”

“What?”

The man seemed genuinely puzzled, and the boy went on.

“There’s one person left who I really need to kill. One of the five you mentioned—was a mistake... I messed up.”

It was a lame excuse, he knew. Still, he hoped the words might generate a slight opportunity for him to exploit, but—

“You killed the wrong one?”

“I did... I did! The last person I killed was *the wrong one! I killed someone I shouldn’t have, someone who had nothing to do with any of this!* At first, I wanted to kill myself over it! But someone got in the way...and I changed my mind. After I killed *the last man...* I’d die then!”

After he said it, the boy realized his mistake.

I killed somebody innocent.

Every time he remembered what he’d done, the shadow of Ice Pick Thompson grew fainter in his heart.

It’s no good.

He couldn’t fight it anymore.

This is what I deserve. I killed a completely innocent person—this is what I deserve.

The boy had completely lost Ice Pick Thompson. As his eyes started to burn, this time, he prepared to die in earnest.

However...

“The wrong person...?” Frowning, the hitman slowly lowered his gun.

“Huh?”

“I’m even more intrigued by your insanity now.” The hitman took a step back, then took a newspaper out of some unknown recess of his

coat. “I bought this before I came here, in order to gain a deeper knowledge of your insanity... Look.”

With that, Smith tossed the newspaper down onto the table.

The *Daily Days*.

When the boy saw the newspaper’s name, he recognized it—the information broker he’d encountered on his way home had said that was the paper he belonged to.

On the front page was the headline “Ice Pick Thompson’s Fifth Mad Murder”—

And when he saw the smaller headlines below it, the boy’s eyes went wide.

“First Female Victim”

“Prostitute Slain”

“The Malevolent Ghost of Jack the Ripper”

“Huh...?”

For a moment, his vision blurred, and his sense of reality was draining away.

Watching his reaction, the hitman frowned.

“How insane would you have to be—to *mistake a streetwalker in a smoking-hot dress for a man?*”

It wasn’t clear whether the boy had heard the question. He snatched up the newspaper and scanned it.

Then, his eyes stopped moving—and his face blanched.

“What... What is this? Wh-wha—what the hell...?”

“?”

“Lisha...was...killed...?”

Apparently, he had found the victim's name.

"Lisha Darken. That's the prostitute you killed yesterday, isn't it?"

But the boy didn't seem to have heard the hitman.

"No... This isn't true!" Mark fell to his knees. He'd gone deathly white, he was trembling—and then he screamed.

"Why... Why is Miss Lisha dead?!"

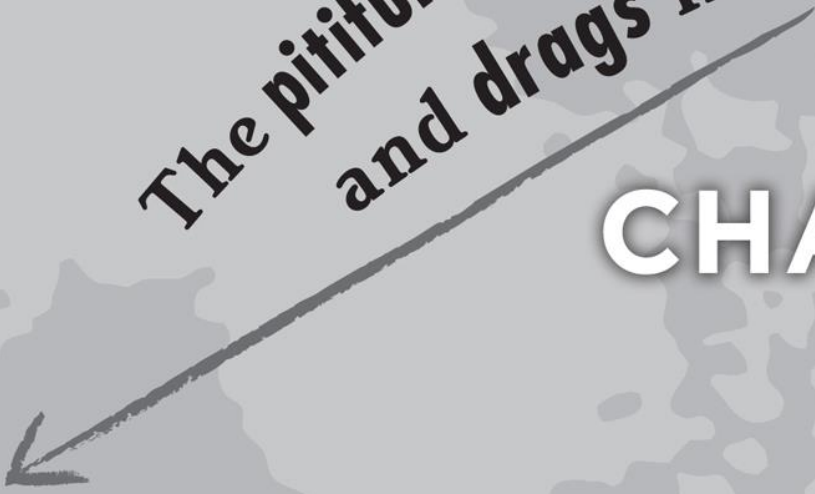
There was no telling what Smith thought as he watched the shivering boy.

He quietly shook his head and raised his shotgun again.

Then, in one smooth motion, he took aim at the back of the boy's head and pulled the trigger.



**The pitiful victim drowns in drugs
and drags in the accomplice**



CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 10: The pitiful victim drowns in drugs and drags in the accomplice

The time was two days previously.

The rain had begun pouring down—and Elmer was just about to meet Mark on the bridge.

On his boss's orders, Lester, the young reporter, was on his way to interview the gang of juvenile delinquents on the city streets.

When the sudden rain began, Lester began to run through the dark alley, cursing under his breath.

It's quite a ways to the spot where those punks hang out... And even if I go, with this rain, there's no telling whether they'll be there.

He turned into a narrow alley. His surroundings grew more deserted, and as he approached the next corner, he spotted a lone figure.

And then—realizing it was an old acquaintance, he slowed down and called to her.

“Lisha...”

From how she was dressed, it was obvious she was a prostitute. As she turned toward Lester, her eyes were vacant, and there were big, dark circles under them. After a rather long pause, she broke into an exhausted smile.

“Oh...? My... If it isn't Lester... Fancy meeting you here of all places. Heh-heh.”

She was still in her late twenties. That was what Lester's memory told him, at least.

Still, despite the youth of her features, her dark circles, her pale complexion, and her lifeless expression made her look ten or even twenty years older than she actually was.

“...You still haven’t cut out the dope?”

“Oh, no, if anything, it’s the other way ’round—the opposite, I mean. You know, for about six months now, you see, um... The Runoratas stopped coming by, all of a sudden. Gustavo’s men, they...you know, they used to keep lots of the good stuff on the market, but then, uh, it all went away... And so... Well, you see, don’t you...? I found other...uh, dope, and I’d...been making do with that... But you know, uh, the other drugs don’t work that well, and my health ain’t the best, so I don’t... You see? So I’d like to cut out dope now.”

“Yeah, I get it. I don’t think quitting will help you at this point. See you around.”

Coming to the conclusion that she’d just about gone past the point of no return, Lester decided this was a waste of time and turned to go.

Suddenly, Lisha grabbed his arm.

“Look, I don’t have time to deal with a gowed-up dame like you—”

But then he broke off.

The woman was holding an ice pick. Lester stiffened, feeling sweat beading and pouring down his back.

“L-Lisha?! Y-you...” Lester hastily jumped back, and Lisha giggled.

“Oh, c’mon, what’s the matter? Why so startled...hmm? Did you think I was Ice Pick Thompson?”

“.....”

“Ice picks are, uh...selling well right now, you know. To the younger crowd. Not very respectful, but there’s a bit of an ice pick fad...you see.”

Wearing a sickly smile, Lisha toyed with the ice pick. The sight of a seductive woman playing with the deadly spike might have come off as provocative, but Lester had better things to worry about.

“...Quit with the lousy jokes.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Are you worried? Are you pretending you haven’t noticed? ...You must know what all the victims had in common. You think you might be next? Does it scare you? Are you scared...?”

“I said knock it off!” Snatching the ice pick from the woman’s hand, Lester snapped at her.

As she looked at the young journalist, Lisha’s now-focused eyes warped—and she laughed.

“Heh-heh...heh-heh-heh... But that’s so strange. You, scared of an ice pick.”

“.....”

“Way back when, *I heard you enjoyed using one of those yourself.*”

“...Enough.”

Lester was drenched with cold sweat, and a twisted emotion began bubbling up in his heart.

He clearly didn’t want her to go on, but Lisha didn’t notice. She kept talking cheerfully, ever so cheerfully, in her charming, unhinged voice.

“Everyone else said so. *When you tortured and killed Paula, too.* You heated the ice pick until it glowed red, and you seemed to be having loads of fun with it.”

“Enough!”

Lester felt something twisting violently in the deepest pit of his stomach.

Every muscle in his body was tense.

His very being was trying to deny Lisha’s words—and his own past.

But Lisha kept going.

“Oh, it’s fine, really. Nobody’s listening... Not many walk through a back alley like this when it’s raining. They’re all scared of Ice Pick Thompson...all of them.”

“.....”

“Funny, isn’t it...? Scared of such a, you know, *an adorable child*... Isn’t it funny?”

“...?”

This time, the violent tension was in his spine.

“...What?” Lester murmured.

As the woman responded, her eyes were fixed on some other place.

“It isn’t as if any of them...have to be afraid, you know... You people are the only ones Mark’s going to kill.”

“Mark...?”

For a moment, he couldn’t understand what the woman was saying.

Desperately, he searched the connections in his mind for the name “Mark.”

Then he remembered the Wilmens boy.

“You can’t mean...Paula’s son...?” he asked.

The woman answered him, her eyes hollow. Her rain-soaked dress seemed even more sensual.

“Yes, that’s right. Him, you know, he looks just like Paula... Around the eyes and such, you know. You know what I mean, don’t you? He knew me as one of Paula’s work friends, before you killed her, so, um, sometimes I crept over quietly and cooked for him and things.”

“...Hey. Nobody told me about that.”

“My... My, my, my, you do say some funny things... I mean, if I’d told you, you would have been against it, wouldn’t you?” The woman giggled.

Her speech was intelligible, but from her total lack of tact, it appeared her mind was very nearly broken.

Without even thinking about what might happen to her—Lisha kept speaking.

She still seemed cheerful, even amused.

“The thing is, you know... Paula left that boy quite a bit of money. If I did... If I did kind things for him, he’d give me money, so... You see, I was using that money to buy more dope, but... That boy, I swear... He started telling me to quit the drugs. Like a little grown-up. After that, he wouldn’t give me any more money, so I—I told him...”

“.....”

“I said, ‘If you give me money, I’ll tell you a secret you want to know.’”

“Hey... You didn’t...” Lester’s face paled.

Tilting her face toward the rainy sky, Lisha delivered the coup de grâce.

“I told him I’d tell him about the people who killed his mother!”

Lester felt something else inside him ready to snap—
—but even he didn’t know where it was this time.

“And so, you see, I’d like, um, you know, to borrow from you—you too. Some money. If you like, I can pay you back with my body...all right? No, no, don’t misunderstand. This time—this time I swear it’s not for dope... It’s so I can stop... I need money, then I’ll go to a doctor, see? I’ll cut out the drugs, this time—this time, I’ll fly just as

high as can be...see? All the way to heaven, so just, money...I want you to loan me money... Okay?"

Lisha didn't understand the gravity of what she'd said.

Whatever was in her mind was something Lester could never see.

She didn't have a thought for her own life anymore.

“...If you want to fly so badly, I’ll give you a push.”

Her reward came to her directly, in the form of violence.

“All the way to heaven.”

The ice pick sank into the woman's neck, although her drug abuse had dulled all sensation for her—

And no sooner had he pulled it out than he struck again.

Over and over

and over and over and over

and over and over and over and over and over

and over and over and over

and over and over and over and over and over

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After intentionally making sure she was dead, the man screamed words that were a transparent but realistic act.

In that moment, the reporter who feared death met a killer.

More accurately...

The young reporter, who had been a trusted confidant of a member of Szilard Quates's inner circle, was reunited with the bloodthirsty murderer he'd locked away inside himself.

And then a day or so passed.



The basement of the jazz hall Coraggioso

It had been a few hours since he'd ordered the hit from Smith.

Thinking that the man might have finished the job by now, Lester was quietly sitting in a chair.

This office was also the headquarters of the Gandor Family. Surrounded by the tough-looking men—Lester just waited calmly.

Paula and Lisha. What a pair of dumb broads.

I just... I just don't want to die, that's all. Why would they get in my way?

Paula, too... She should've given it to me... After old Barnes gave her the failed liquor to hang on to, she should've shared.

As he reflected, Lester sighed.

I can't believe she hadn't helped herself to any of it.

It's not like she owed anything to Szilard or Barnes at that point.

Why did she let the chance to become immortal pass her by? I just can't understand it.

As he was mulling over it all, the door at the back of the office opened, and a man stuck his head out.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lester.”

“No, no, I was late. I wanted to be here sooner, but it took me a while to lose the cop who was keeping an eye on me.”

“Thanks for that... You always have useful information for us, and we’re really hoping to hang on to this friendship of ours.”

“No, I’m constantly in your debt, Mr. Casetti.”

“Call me Nico.”

The other man in this friendly conversation was a Gandor Family executive who was renowned as one of their best fighters.

Nicola Casetti, aka Nico.

When they’d gone to the mattresses with the Runorata Family at the end of the previous year, he’d taken on ten men with light machine guns and lived. Not only that, but he’d also managed to haul one of the enemies back to the office.

“We tried sounding out the cops independently,” Nico said quietly, his eyes sharp. “Seems like they think the guy who killed number five, the woman, may not be the same fella.”

“.....”

“The previous four were stabbed from below first... But this last one was stabbed in the neck, from above.”

The emotions in his voice were difficult to read. The man was extremely intimidating, but Lester hid how he felt and played it cool.

“That’s probably true.”

“...What?”

“There are multiple culprits.”

“What do you mean?” The other man latched on to the statement. Internally, Lester gave a sly grin—and began to speak.

He gave him the scenario he'd cooked up earlier today, based on the information he'd gained in the past several days.

"The culprit is a hitman named Laz Smith. He hired a group of kids with nothing better to do, and he's been making them kill off people with connections to the Gandor Family... In my estimation, anyway."

"Laz Smith...?"

"Yeah. He's a tall man who wears a long coat, even in the summer."

"Why would a hitman like him go after us?"

"No idea. Maybe he's got some kinda vendetta."

Lester remembered what he'd asked the Runorata Family for:

Set me up with a hitman I can use, then get rid of. As long as they can snuff out a kid, I don't care.

All he wanted was for the guy to buy him some time—but he'd stumbled onto an unexpected payoff.

A peculiar saloon girl poked her head out from behind Nico.

"Laz Smith is the guy from before, amigo. Berga punched him out and put him in the hospital!" she said, unwittingly helping Lester.

"...That's the one, then." Speaking heavily, Nico quietly got to his feet.

"Are you going somewhere, Nico?"

"Relax. The bosses are out right now. I won't do anything dumb." As he calmly got ready to leave, Nico's eyes were startlingly sharp. "I'm just gonna hear what he has to say."

"Oooh, what's this? If there's gonna be trouble, I'm going, too, amigo!" she chirped, failing to notice the tension.

Nico's face was expressionless as he murmured, "...Suit yourself."

With an out-of-place saloon girl and a few comrades behind him, Nico quietly climbed the stairs. Just before he left, he called to Tick over in a corner of the room.

“Get your scissors as dirty as possible.

“Make sure cutting into this guy hurts as bad as possible.”

“...What’s gotten into Casetti?”

“Oh. Just between us—that doll who got killed, Lisha... Nico’s had the hots for her for a while. And I think it was mutual. Then he gave her an ultimatum; said if she didn’t get clean, he was never gonna see her again... And I think she was trying. Can’t believe someone snuffed her out before she could...”

“Huh...”

Lester gazed toward the stairs; Nico had already vanished. He smiled inwardly.

Was it delight that things were going just as he’d planned? Had he imagined Smith and the others getting carved up by Tick’s scissors? Or had that conversation reminded him of killing Lisha?

Lester kept on laughing silently, although none of it showed on his face.

On and on, on and on.

It was as if the roars of laughter only he could hear were resonating with the rain falling beyond the window...



When Smith opened the door and stepped outside, he ran smack into a young guy in blue.

“Huh? Smith? What’re you doing here?”

“...What about you people? Why are you here?”

Graham, Elmer, and Shaft had looked up Mark's address at the newspaper and come here to see him, but—instead, they found a man they'd parted from just a few hours earlier. The trio's eyes widened at the sudden reunion, and they seemed mystified.

"Uh, well, we had a little business with a guy named Mark who lives here...", Shaft explained, speaking for the group—but Smith gave a little sigh and shook his head, his expression cold.

"Poor timing, then... He's dead."

"Huh?"

"Mark Wilmens—*is the boy I killed just a minute ago.*"

He confessed it far too easily.

As the other three looked at one another, Smith coldly went on.

"I'm on my way to meet my client now. Tag along if you want."



The rain was still pouring down.

The sound echoed powerfully through the streets of New York like a requiem for the killers.

The endless rain hid those killers in darkness—

—perhaps preparing to rinse away the river of blood about to be shed.

Interlude

The man feared death.

He himself knew his own fears were extreme, and he thought it explained all the abnormal behavior he sometimes exhibited.

“Well, that’s just how it is.” Grinning, the man quietly raised his head. *“I mean, nobody wants to die.”*

He spoke words of fear.

He didn’t want to die.

He considered that impulse to be biological instinct.

Therefore, he believed anything he did because of it could be condoned.

“You gotta share the joy with everyone.”

The man was smiling.

“Isn’t that right, Paula?”

As he smiled, and smiled more, the man stuck the ice pick he held into a pile of hot coals.

The iron core grew hotter.

His hand was being exposed to the heat as well, but he didn’t pay the least bit of attention to that. In one fluid motion, he held the glowing red iron out to the woman who was seated in front of him.

To be accurate, she was being held down.

She drooped limply; it wasn’t clear whether she was conscious. The man quietly shook his head.

He was still smiling.

“I’m not the one to blame here, Paula.”

The man with the ice pick murmured, more making excuses to himself than talking to the woman.

He really did fear death.

But that had nothing to do with this—even though the man treated them as the same.

“I just don’t want to die, that’s all. Nobody does. So why would you try to keep it all for yourself?”

“Now...where did you put the failed liquor?”


The man had asked a question, but he didn’t even wait to hear the answer before he stabbed the glowing red iron into the woman.

She stifled a scream, and the man’s smile widened at the sound.

And so time passed, and...

...a boy who wished for death and revenge met a peculiar hitman...

...and a reporter who feared death reunited with the killer lurking inside him.



The smile junkie strides cheerfully between the killers

FINAL CHAPTER

FINAL CHAPTER: The smile junkie strides cheerfully between the killers

The next morning The *Daily Days* newspaper The president's office
"So...? How did it all pan out?"

The conversation was taking place in a newspaper office, and the reporters and editors were making the usual racket downstairs.

A mountain of documents, a towering symbol of their trade, spoke in a voice with an age that was difficult to determine.

More accurately, the voice belonged to the president of the *Daily Days*, who was seated behind the mound of paper burying the desk in the center of the room.

One part of the room was a disaster, as if bundles of paper had fallen and accumulated instead of snow, but the opposite side was extremely neat. One could imagine that the edge of that desk was bounded by a few extra years of time as well as space.

The voice of the president—the leader of the information brokers and to whom this room belonged—was tranquil in a way that didn't match his title, but the other men in the room listening were rather tense.

"He's right! If you were in danger, why didn't you report it right away?"

The individual who'd spoken—Elean—was a black man with a lot of energy and usually wore Chinese garb. Several of the staff members who were seated around him turned expressionless eyes on a middle-aged man who stood in the corner.

Meanwhile, the man himself scratched his cheek lightly, averting his eyes as if unsure.

“Hmm... I’m extremely perplexed as to how I should report it.”

“What do you mean, Carl?” Elean frowned.

Briefly glancing at Elean, Carl sighed and began to go over what happened.

“I think the president knows already, but this affair has two or three layers of ‘confidential information.’”

“...!”

The other men in the room gulped. Ignoring them, the voice spoke from behind the documents, as tranquil as ever.

“I see... Well, I did anticipate that. I suppose it means our city still bears the scars of Szilard Quates’s influence?”

Szilard Quates.

At the name, several of the staff members frowned and glanced at one another.

“Whoa, wait, what’s Szilard got to do with this? Wasn’t the top-secret information about the Gandors?”

“You answered your own question, Elean.” Quietly lifting his head, Carl began to explain about the incident’s background. “Szilard comes into it *because* the Gandors are involved.”

Supplementing that intriguing remark, the entity behind the documents spoke with a hint of wry amusement.

“The victims were all connected to the Gandor Family. However, that connection was a superficial one.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were originally *connected to one another*. They each approached the Gandor Family separately, searching for something very specific.”

As the president offered a circuitous explanation, several of the information brokers put the pieces together into an answer on their own.

Watching his colleagues out of the corner of his eye, Carl picked up where the president had left off.

“See, Szilard’s old hounds knew about the liquor of immortality—but they could only follow the trail so far.”

Two years previously...

Szilard Quates, an alchemist, had been pursuing a perfected elixir of immortality. Soon after its completion, it had abruptly vanished, along with the alchemist himself and his assistant, Ennis.

The men had been left with one piece of information. Just one.

The liquor of immortality had been stolen.

The last place they knew it had been was the Gandor Family hideout.

The old men working directly under Szilard were already under observation by the Bureau of Investigation. Their minions, though, knew only two facts:

One was that the liquor of immortality had disappeared at the Gandors’ place.

The other was the whereabouts of the failed liquor that had been used in experiments.

Several men and women who’d been in touch with one another independently had each made contact with the Gandor Family separately.

At the same time, there was a search for Paula Wilmens, who had been a protégé of Barnes since her childhood.

There were rumors that she was a daughter Barnes had had with a mistress when he was already getting on in years, but there was no one who could confirm that now.

After all, Paula herself was no longer alive.

“Szilard had given Barnes some of the failed liquor to use in experiments, and Barnes had put Paula in charge of keeping it safe. In addition, the old men probably didn’t truly trust their comrade Barnes. They knew that Paula had removed several bottles of the unfinished formula from that warehouse—the one that eventually burned down—to keep as a backup supply.”

Carl sighed with resignation, and a bespectacled information broker with a sprinkling of white in his hair continued the story.

“And so she was killed. Whether she revealed where it was or not... Personally, I would have snatched her son, locked him up somewhere, and used him as a hostage.”

The man gave a sinister chuckle. Beside him, Nicholas, the copy editor of the English edition, shook his head.

“I bet they were playing it safe. If her son went missing as well, they wouldn’t have been able to pass it off as a drug-related incident. They must have decided that slowly infiltrating the Gandors would be a better bet.”

Carl nodded in agreement, and the president smoothly added on to the proposal from behind the documents.

“Very true... It would have been one thing to kidnap her young son first and use him as a bargaining chip, but kidnapping the boy later could have drawn attention. After all, for a drug-related punishment—it’s a gruesome picture, but I suspect they would have killed her child in front of her first, then killed Paula.”

“But then her son went on a crusade for vengeance... A story like this is hard to swallow. Wasn’t there any other way...?” Elean seemed despondent.

Lowering his eyes, Carl answered bitterly. “He could have chosen not to take revenge, but... Going to the police wouldn’t have done any good. The whole incident was faked, and even a police officer and a reporter were in on it. I can’t imagine they’d reopen the investigation now on the testimony of a dope-addled woman.”

For just a moment, no one said anything.

Then, the silence was broken by a voice that was as tranquil as ever.

“Carl. I think it’s about time I asked you the key question.”

“...Yes, sir.”

“What happened to that boy—Mark Wilmens, aka Ice Pick Thompson—and Lester the reporter, the last individual on his list?” Carl fell silent, an indefinable expression on his face. Then, he heaved an even deeper sigh. “Ironically...Mark Wilmens died. He was killed by a nameless hitman. I don’t even know who he is.”

As the information broker delivered his report, he refused to look up, and his voice was full of frustration.

“And that pathetic, cowardly journalist gets off scot-free. Absolutely scot-free.

“The story’s as ironic as they come.”

And now—let’s roll back time to the very middle of the crazy ruckus.



Twelve hours earlier In the basement of the jazz hall Coraggioso

“Yes... I understand.”

Still holding the telephone receiver, the mafioso turned to the young reporter.

“Hey, it’s Nico. He says the kids aren’t at the abandoned factory or any of the usual haunts. Any idea where else they might be, chief?”

Lester narrowed his eyes, mentally reopening the plan for this affair.

So they cleared out, huh? Is that a good thing or not?

“...Well, let’s see.”

It’s a little early, but I’ll get rid of that hitman first.

“I initially thought he was suspicious because he’d contacted me for information several times recently.”

“Hold it, you didn’t say anything about that.”

“I didn’t have time to mention it. Oh, don’t worry; I didn’t send him any information about the Gandors. I’m not that stupid.”

He spoke with considerable confidence, and for a moment, the man holding the receiver frowned—but then prompted him to go on. Intel came first.

“Anyway, he was acting pretty odd. I did a little digging on my own...and I found out this gang of delinquents has had some infighting lately. *I suspect one of the boys who’s been carrying out the actual crimes may be bumped off soon...* In any case, he seems to have contacted several reporters like myself, and...when he does, the location has always been the same.”

Hiding a rather sinister smile, Lester quietly named the place.

“It’s an abandoned building that’s slated for demolition, right near Grand Central Station. Do you know the one?”



Meanwhile On an avenue in New York

“Hey, you said you killed that Mark kid... What’s that about, Smith?”

“Exactly what I said. Someone ordered a hit, so I killed him.”

“In that apartment?”

“Yeah. Disposing of his corpse in there took a while.”

The hitman smiled quietly at the young guy in the coveralls, whose wrench dangled limply.

Out on the avenue, the rain was falling steadily.

Ordinarily, even this late on a rainy night, there would have been a few people out and about. After the Ice Pick Thompson incidents, though, the street was completely deserted.

The rain was still coming down, and Graham, Shaft, and Elmer followed Smith under a relatively large umbrella.

When they’d walked for a while, Shaft leaned close to Graham’s ear and murmured:

“This is bad, Mr. Graham.”

“What is?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?! It means we’re connected to a hit, you know? Right now! This very minute!”

“Well, that’s true,” Graham answered simply, and Shaft exhaled, pressing his fingers to his temples.

“Is that all you have to say...?”

“Back when Ladd was with us, we were connected to hits all the time, remember?”

“Yes, and I was over the moon when it stopped. Would you try to appreciate how I feel about this?”

“All right, I will!” Graham dropped a rain-wet hand onto Shaft’s shoulder and said, with eyes full of pity, “...You must be going through a lot now. So, uh, don’t die, I guess.”

And that was all.

“Okay, let’s get going!”

“Why am I part of his gang anyway?” Shaft pressed his free hand to his head.

This time, Elmer put a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you worried about something? If you don’t know what to do, then smile! You know how in rock-paper-scissors, you can wait a hair to see what your opponent will do and then shoot? Doesn’t matter how sad or mad you are, if you start smiling after, you can cancel it out! Smiles are magic, you know. Even after a whole life of misfortune, if someone is able to smile happily for those last few seconds, even just the time it takes the executioner’s blade to fall, then their whole life was a blessing.”

“Yeah, if that was possible, life would be a cakewalk.”

“Cakewalk or not, it’s still worth doing.” The man nodded, brimming over with confidence.

Shaft’s gaze slid away, as if he was averting his eyes from something unsettling. “...Elmer,” he muttered. “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this so soon after we’ve just met, but...right now, I’m actually a little jealous of your endless well of optimism.”

“Ha-ha. No need to be jealous.” Elmer laughed a little self-consciously, and as he went on, his expression didn’t change. “All you have to do is sell your soul. Smiles come first, both for you and others.”

“Do you have any idea how creepy that sounds?”

Elmer had blurted out that eerie comment with that same grin. Coming from an ordinary person, the remark could have been taken as nothing more than a bad joke, but—Shaft just couldn't seem to see it that way.

After all, he'd just been dragged into a murder incident—and he was still wearing that same old smile.

After they walked through the rain for a bit longer, when they were fairly close to Grand Central Station, they saw a building that had no lights on. Smith stopped for a moment, looking at Graham's group.

"...My client is in that building, yet I'm here talking to myself. Nothing more."

"?"

"I didn't tell you to come with me or anything of the sort. I'm going into that building on my own. And so, if you choose to follow me, I'm not responsible for anyone you see in there, or for any inclination you may have to tail my client. Got it?"

That was all Smith said before he started toward the building. As he was leaving, though, Elmer—who hadn't pressed him for any information at all until then—called after him.

"Did you really kill that boy, Smith?"

"Yes, I did."

"A kid that young?"

"That's right. I can kill anybody—man, woman, or child. After all, only someone insane would become a hitman. And once the bounds of common sense are released, there's no limit to how cruel you can be. Ahh, when I remember the moment I blew him away with my shotgun, I can recall the satisfaction of a job well done." Smith's answer was not exactly direct, but he was wearing a supremely heartless smile.

However, Elmer whispered something in his ear.

“_____, _____.”

“...What?”

“_____, _____.”

The sound of the rain covered the words, and Graham and Shaft didn't catch what was said.

Smith frowned a little. Then he gave an uncomfortable smile, as if to write off whatever Elmer had told him, and shook his head.

He started toward the building. As they watched the hitman's receding back, the other three exchanged looks.

“...Let me tell you a sad, sad story...”

Smacking his wrench, Graham quietly mulled over what had just happened. “What do you think Smith wants from us, saying what he did? If he took the time to say it, I assume he wants us to do something. I dunno what it is, though. If we can't figure it out, will we wind up causing trouble for Smith, as well as ourselves? Damn, I'm already a threat to the world. Am I gonna start causing trouble for Smith now, too? If this keeps up, I may even end up a thorn in Ladd's side without even meaning to. What do you think, Shaft? Do you think I can turn over a new leaf now and become a hero?”

“No, uh...Smith and Ladd are the ones causing trouble for us. Actually, I was pretty scared Smith was about to silence us for good...!”

“If he was going to shut us up, he wouldn't have told us he'd killed the kid in the first place,” Graham replied, balancing his wrench on his head. It was impossible to tell whether he was nervous about this.

Shaft groaned, on the verge of a breakdown. “...! Well, yeah, that's true, but. It's true. But.”

“You’re such a worrywart, Shaft. Keep that up, and you’ll go bald like Placido.”

“Enough.”

Any more time talking to Graham would be time wasted, Shaft decided, so he walked over to Elmer. The third member of the group was still holding his small umbrella.

“By the way, Elmer,” Shaft said dubiously, “what did you say to Smith there at the end?”

Even now, Elmer showed absolutely no sign of concern.

Oh, this guy’s an odd duck, too. Shaft was certain of that, but he was still curious about what Elmer had said. In fact, that was why he wanted to know.

“Oh, that’s simple. I...”

Just as Elmer was about to answer—

—a metallic screech tore through the rain and echoed across the avenue, followed by muffled gunshots.



Less than a minute earlier Inside the abandoned building

As Smith entered the building to give his follow-up report, possibly because of the weather, he felt a vague *chill* despite the summer heat.

Mark Wilmens, the boy who was Ice Pick Thompson.

I want you to show me definite proof he’s dead, his client had requested.

Going out of his way to meet a hitman twice—what a strange thing to ask.

He'd suspected it might be some sort of trap, but if the cops were here for a sting, the reporter would go down, too.

From the way his client had spoken, Smith had concluded he was unusually afraid the boy would survive, and as a result, he'd decided to cooperate.

For someone who made a living on the wrong side of the law, it was an unbelievably careless move, and just a few seconds later, he would learn as much the hard way.

It happened in the moment when he reached the depths of the building, glimpsed gaudy fabric out of the corner of his eye...

...and realized the clothing belonged to the individual he'd resolved to kill just a few hours earlier.

Maria... Maria Barcelito!

She was a dark-skinned girl wielding Japanese swords. They'd worked together on a job before, just once.

Even before he saw her smile, Smith's eyes caught the naked blade she'd drawn.

The next moment, a metallic noise split the frigid air, sharp and cold. Smith felt fearful sweat break out under his collar.

"You got me...dammit."

Smith had stopped his opponent's katana with the shotgun he'd taken out of his coat. He ground his teeth audibly, then cursed his own carelessness.

Who'd have thought there'd be another hitman waiting here, instead of the cops?

The girl peered at Smith's reaction over her blade, laughing with glee.

“Ah-ha-ha! Long time no see, huh, amigo?! I heard you’d been in a hospital somewhere! Congrats on being discharged!”

“...Thanks.”

With strength far beyond what one would expect from a young woman, Maria pushed the katana toward him, gun and all.

“Too bad, though! You would’ve been a lot happier if you’d died in there, too!”

“Shut up!” Kicking the girl away from him, Smith leaped backward.

He took another gun out of his coat and tried to draw a bead on Maria’s arm—but it was too late.

She’d closed the distance.

Even after separating her from him, the next thing he knew, she was right in his face.

“Ghk...!”

He squeezed the trigger, but Maria’s hawklike eyes picked up the angle of the muzzle and the movements in Smith’s arm perfectly, and she leaned away just before he fired.

Slipping under the bullet, Maria leaped sideways—and took a rapid slash at Smith’s long coat.

“Gahk!”

The shock that struck his abdomen was greater than he’d anticipated, but it didn’t have the unique pain of a slash wound.

The dozens of guns he’d stowed inside his coat had stopped Maria’s katana.

“...Tch! So I still can’t cut iron, huh? That’s too bad, amigo.”

“You little... You scratched my guns!”

Maria had instantly recovered her balance; Smith was still staggering.

While they exchanged remarks that didn't quite make sense, the pair had put a distance of about five yards between them.

"Fine, amigo. My technique is wasted on you, but I'll be good and get serious!"

With that, Maria drew the second sword she wore at her waist.

One who fought with two swords, another who fought with two guns. They made for an odd pair indeed as they faced off against each other. They may have worked together once, but now they were enemies through and through.

"So would you rather I stabbed you, or cut off your head, or split it like a melon? I'll let you choose, amigo!"

"If I were in your position, I'd rather give you the works."

"Don't get greedy, amigo! Besides, you're weaker than me! Last time, Berga knocked you down in no time flat, remember? I didn't lose back then!" She was obviously taunting him, and it was the first childish thing she'd done this entire time.

"Claire Stanfield was toying with you."

"I could beat him now! Besides, that doesn't mean I can't beat you, *amigo*."

Maria's reaction was as girlish as before—but Smith knew.

No matter how she presented herself, she could kill people with startling ease.

And even though she had brought two katana to a gunfight, he knew it wouldn't be a handicap for her at all.

Yet Smith's expression was calm, and he lowered both his guns.

"Yeah, that's right," he said.

"?"

“I’m...weaker than you.”

“? What’s the matter, amigo? Begging for your life?” Maria asked, confused.

Smith spoke quietly, his weapons still lowered. “When the Gandors took me out, while I was lying in that hospital bed...I thought over some things.”

He returned the pistol in his right hand to his coat, then took out another shotgun to match the one in his left hand.

“I thought about how some things are so far beyond the bounds of reason that they can never be explained.”

With a rather self-deprecating smile—Smith dexterously stripped off his coat and tossed it aside.

“Since then, I’ve managed to face the world with a bit more humility.”

His arms passed through the sleeves, shotguns and all, and a heavy noise reverberated behind him.

Smith, who’d shucked off over sixty pounds of equipment, cracked his neck.

“And I hold greater respect for society, God, and insanity.”

“What are you saying, amigo? Are you sure about this? That coat was your armor, and you just took it off.”

As Maria watched, mystified, Smith took his hat off as well.

Now in a white dress shirt and black trousers, he was very lightly equipped. However, the odd holster belt he wore over his shirt still held several guns.

“I’ll be grateful to this world, in which I still have a plan, lunatic that I am.”

“I don’t think this speech is as impressive as you think it is, amigo.”
The comment could have been a natural reaction or an attempt to provoke him.

Smith only grinned at her slyly—

“I’ll be grateful to you, too, amigo-woman.”

“Why?”

“Yes, on this momentous day when I resumed my work as a hitman...
Oh!”

His eyes went wide, and he just—jumped.

*“Whatever goddammit how dare you try to deep-six my reputation
you snot-nosed ankle-biter just die already!”*

Even faster than the seething words could reach her, he pushed forward, forward, forward.

It was a reckless move: He was armed with shotguns, and yet he was closing the distance between himself and his opponent.

But as surprising as the maneuver was, Maria simply swept her right-hand katana to intercept him.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sorry about that! This is fun; you’re even dumber than I thought, amigo!” Maria shouted, but she moved faster than her words did.

By the time she had finished speaking, the crossed barrels of the shotguns had blocked her attack with a loud metallic crash.

Despite that, Maria smoothly used the katana in her other hand for a follow-up attack.

A moment before her blade reached him, Smith twisted.

The crossed guns spun like a windmill, and one of the barrels came to bear on the center of Maria’s torso. In the space of a blink, he’d pulled the trigger.

But Maria had bent backward, spinning to face the other direction and kicking the shotgun up.

One would have expected a trademark bang and a spray of bullets—but for some reason, it misfired.

The only sound was a pleasant *click*, and Maria took that as her cue to launch herself off the floor again.

Smith had already let go of the shotguns, though, and replaced them with pistols that had been attached to his gun belt.

As before, he had one in each hand. He didn't take aim; he simply shot in his opponent's general direction.

The girl avoided the burst by getting right up close for a thrust.

It was a close shave.

The butt of Smith's gun stopped the katana, whether by coincidence or design.

The impact propelled them apart, and they put some distance between themselves again.

The jolt had made Smith fumble both his guns, and he reached around to the back of his waist holster and grabbed new weapons, while Maria dropped into a crouch a short distance away and stayed there.

Whoever was foolish enough to move first would be at a disadvantage.



The natural differences between guns and katana vanished, and the two struck a magnificent balance against each other in both distance and posture.

For a moment, they froze. Then, before long, they both began to smile.

“I’m surprised. You’re pretty tough, amigo.”

“...Same here. When I saw how easily Claire dispatched you, I thought you were just a small-timer.”

The tension was so high it was about to snap, and both combatants were constantly running the calculations.

It was a tinderbox. The scales would tip easily, depending on who chose to make the first move.

That was how it should have been, at least.

After only a few seconds, the scales were abruptly kicked over.

Chak, kachak—the telltale sound of guns being cocked.

When Smith shifted his focus slightly, he saw several men standing in a row, blocking the entrance to the building.

They were very obviously gangsters. Each one was holding a Thompson or sawed-off shotgun, and the muzzles were all trained on him.

There were a few seconds of silence.

“...Where the hell did this come from?” Smith broke the silence, frowning, and Maria glared at the men with vague disappointment.

“Hey! You can’t do that, amigo! I’m the one playing with this guy!” she complained.

The man who responded was especially intimidating, even among the gangsters. “From what I saw, it didn’t look like *playing* was the word.”

“But, Nico!”

“Try to understand, miss. You’re technically a member of the Family. I can’t let you get scarred up while the bosses are away.”

“Tch...”

Most likely deciding the man wasn’t going to compromise, Maria sheathed her katana without a fuss.

Meanwhile, Smith wasn’t able to lift a finger with all the firepower focused on him.

The hitman wouldn’t be getting out of this, it seemed. Quietly, the gangster looked up and murmured, his face expressionless.

“You’re Laz Smith, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I should be glad to find that a fellow I’ve never met before would know my name. Or should a hitman consider it an embarrassment to have his identity discovered?”

As Smith bluffed, Nico snorted.

“Frankly, you surprised me, too. Never woulda believed *you’d manage to cross guns* with Maria. ‘Specially when you’re an idiot who’d fight katana with guns in the first place. I heard Berga laid you out with one attack, but apparently you were just up against the wrong guy.”

Nico was currently unarmed, and he took a cigarette out of his jacket and lit it as he went on.

“I’m Nicola, from the Gandor Family. Now, I know the maggots in your brain are drowning in all that rain outside, but you think you can piece together why we’re here?”

“No idea. The Gandor Family bosses don’t need to fear petty hitmen, do they?”

“Playing dumb, huh?” Nico’s eyes narrowed, and the gravity in his voice grew slightly heavier. “What if I called you...Ice Pick Thompson? Does that grease the gears a little?”

“.....”

When Smith heard that name, his eyes widened in shock.

Nico seemed to take the other man’s response as confirmation. Still expressionless, he issued an order to several of the men behind him.

“...Take him away.”

“Wait.”

“Tick can tell me everything you have to say after he’s done with you.”

Still perfectly calm, Nico turned away, as if he couldn’t stand to even look at Smith for one second longer—

—but then he realized he could make out two splotches of color in that direction.

The colors were behind his men, who still had their guns on Smith. The first one was blue, in the shape of a human figure, and the second was a whirling silver.

When he realized it was a young man, tension ran through Nico’s whole body.

Graham.

He was a dangerous character, a delinquent who’d tangled with the Gandor Family more than once and was still alive to talk about it.

“Let me take this sad, sad story...and end it!”

The young man's wrench stopped spinning, and he shouted over at them animatedly.

"What are you people planning to do with Smith?!"

The voice of the intruder came out of nowhere.

The first one to react was Smith himself.

"...Kid Graham, you moron! I told you to do whatever you wanted, remember?!"

"Well, yeah. So I came here. What's the story, Smith?"

"This situation is extremely precarious, but...I was hoping someone could tell me."

"Ghk... So you're telling me to understand something even the people involved don't understand? Is this a trap? Is Earth harassing its hated enemy again? Or is it the sun? Is this the sun's doing?"

As Graham shouted his nonsense, Nico frowned slightly and asked him a question.

"You again, hmm...? Your boys and ours really haven't hit it off."

"Wha—? If it ain't ol' Nico! I wondered who it was gonna be!"

They seemed to know each other; their faces darkened as they spoke to each other.

"Why are you here?"

"Why do I exist? That's a pretty philosophical question. I'm still able to live here, so does that mean the world has allowed me to stay? ...But I'm its enemy. Why...? Damn, is it showing compassion for its enemies? Damn that sun... He's a real class act."

"...Let me rephrase that. How do you know Mr. Itchy Triggerman here?"

Maria had been watching their exchange from the sidelines, and the second question seemed to puzzle her.

“What do you mean, ‘how’? That reporter guy just told us about it, amigo. Isn’t he the killer? Or one of ‘em?”

“I’ve gone toe to toe with this kid several times. He ain’t a killer.”

“Really? What a letdown, amigo.”

Ignoring Maria, who looked extremely bored, Graham asked a quiet question.

“And? Why are you tussling with the Gandors, chief? Didn’t you quit with that after you got slugged in the face?”

“Seems like you really don’t know.”

For some reason, Graham didn’t seem at all worried, and Nico sighed.

“This fella is Ice Pick Thompson.”

At those words, Graham blinked for a while, stunned. Then he cocked his head like a confused squirrel. “What are you sayin’? Ice Pick Thompson is...” Then, remembering that Elmer had told him Mark’s true identity was a secret, he spun his wrench and rephrased himself. “Ice Pick Thompson is...who?”

“He just told you it’s that Smith guy, amigo,” Maria said, rolling her eyes.

“Nah, nah, nah. There’s no way.”

Graham laughed.

“I mean, Smith’s a hitman, *but he’s never killed a soul.*”

Silence fell again.

Everyone looked rather uncomfortable, and their eyes automatically turned toward Smith.

Smith himself breathed deeply, as if he'd made up his mind about something...

...and then he stated himself simply.

"I am Ice Pick Thompson. That's a fact."

"Chief?"

Graham's eyes had gone wide with surprise, while Nico's narrowed further.

"Well, well... So you admit it?"

"Yeah. I've stabbed four men to death. Haven't gotten the fifth one yet, though."

"Smith, are you okay? Did you hit your head or something?!"

"...?"

Smith's unusual confession had confused Graham further, while Nico stopped moving and took another look at the hitman.

Under their gazes, Smith smiled quietly. His reply was calm.

"It's true. That wasn't a job... It was revenge."



The basement of the jazz hall Coraggioso

"All right... Excuse me. I'll head back to my company for now. We may be getting some new information soon."

As Lester slowly got to his feet, the Gandor man stood up as well.

"I see. Thanks in advance for your help, Mr. Journalist."

"No, no, none of that. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, remember?"

"True. Be careful. It's still raining."

"Yeah, you can say that again."

Lester spoke with a smile, but inwardly, he was wearing a grin of a different sort.

All right. It's not likely, but...that hitman may give them my name.

I've got an excuse ready, but for now, I need to get to the little brat's place. I just may end up finding the stuff this time.

It was an impossibly slim hope, but Lester currently wasn't able to make that call.

Inside him, there were a multitude of "deaths."

The memories of the times he'd killed with his own hands.

The deadly game he was conducting indirectly.

He was finding *happiness* just imagining the results, and it was strengthening his own attachment to life...

The young murderer started toward the stairs and the exit, wearing his journalist smile.

The moment he started up the stairs—

"Huh? What's the matter? Did you forgeeet something?"

—from elsewhere in the room, he heard Tick's laid-back voice.

What's going on?

When he turned around, Tick was looking in his direction, but a little above him.

Up the stairs.

Had that saloon girl come back?

On that thought, he glanced up the stairs, and at the same moment, all the men in the basement sucked in their breath.

When Lester looked up, what he saw was—

—a small figure leaping down toward him, holding an ice pick.

The next instant, Lester felt a shock, and he tumbled down the stairs. But he didn't feel the pain of the hits all over his body.

The unbearably sharp pain in his shoulder had paralyzed the rest of his nerves.

"Gaaaaaaaahk?! Yii— Yeeaaaaaaaugh?!"

Lester couldn't process what had happened to him; all he could do was roll around in agony.

"Hey, stop him!"

"What're you trying to pull, kid?!"

"You okay, Mr. Reporter?"

"You idiot, don't call a doctor!"

"Ohhh. It's all riiight. Getting stabbed there *won't kill him right awaaaay.*"

"We got bigger problems here, Tick!"

"What're you doing, kid?!"

The cacophony in the basement came to him very clearly.

Lester squeezed his blurry eyes shut, forcing all the liquid away, then looked toward the stairs, trying to figure out what had happened to him.

And there he saw—

—the boy who'd appeared near the bottom of the stairs.

"I finally found you."

Holding a rusty ice pick that was wet with fresh blood—the boy looked down at Lester with an impassive, soulless expression.

"You weren't at your apartment or the paper...so this was about the only other place I could think of."



One hour previously Mark's apartment

A click echoed behind him, bringing Mark back to himself in an instant.

When he turned around, the man who'd said he'd come to kill him sighed. He was holding a shotgun and had just squeezed the trigger.

"Well, damn. Come to think of it, shotguns can be very dangerous, so I forgot I'd taken the bullets out. That was one hell of a blunder."

"...?"

The man's remark had sounded inexplicably contrived, and Mark looked at him dubiously.

"What are you...trying to do...? Why haven't you killed me?"

"Just listen. As of now, you are dead."

The next moment, the man made a strange offer, less to the boy than to the killer.

"I'll give you a future, if you'll *give me your past.*"

"...What?"

"I'm a hitman, but I don't have much of a reputation. I don't have any history of killing, or any anecdotes detailing my madness. So I was thinking. The true identity of the mysterious killer, Ice Pick Thompson... Don't you think that would make for a truly, fantastically insane hitman?"

"Huh?"

The young killer had absolutely no idea what the man was saying.

Mark no longer knew how he should react to this, and for a little while, he stayed frozen where he was. Until—

"...I'm saying I'll spare you, so let me claim your murders."

“Yeah, I got that... Why?”

“I just told you why. It’ll give me a reputation.”

“.....”

The boy still didn’t understand, and he cocked his head in a crooked way.

Smith sighed in resignation, then lowered his voice, as if he was wary of his surroundings. “Look, I don’t want to kill a kid. Just shut up and do what I say, okay?” he said guiltily.

Mark’s eyes went round. “You’re a hitman, aren’t you? What about your client?”

“Listen, boy. Anyone who becomes a hitman has always been hopelessly mired in lunacy.”

“...So?”

The boy kept on asking questions, eyeing Smith as if he’d never seen anything so peculiar.

Smith spread his arms wide, chuckled—and made a declaration with no shame, and nothing to gain for anyone but himself.

“It’s the client’s fault for trusting a lunatic in the first place.”



In the basement of the jazz hall Coraggioso

Let’s return to the jazz hall basement again.

“Y...you...! You’re Paula’s...! How the hell...?! Owwww...!”

The confidence he’d had at his power over others’ lives was gone. Right now, he felt death coming for him in the pain of his own stabbed shoulder, and he choked and shrieked more than most people would in his shoes.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't a fatal wound, but Lester had never felt pain like this before, and he was completely convinced he was dying.

"Owww, owwwwwww! You stupid kid, y-you fucking brat! That bastard! What the hell was he doing?! K-kill him—what are you thinking?! Shoot him, now! H-he... He's going to kill me! Dammit! Aaaaaagh!"

Lester writhed and screamed at the nearby mafiosi in an unsightly way.

The gangsters themselves thought he was an embarrassment, but they still reached into their jackets, keeping a wary eye on the boy who stood on the stairs.

They didn't shoot him dead on the spot, but several of their comrades had been killed here a few years earlier, so they weren't about to get careless.

The boy was holding something wrapped in a paper bag in his left hand, and of course his other hand had the ice pick. Other than that, he didn't seem to be carrying anything else suspicious.

"What's the matter? It's not saaafe to walk around with that, you knooow?" Tick asked, completely free of tension.

Mark smiled a little. "I'm sorry. I won't cause trouble for the rest of you," he murmured, and that was all.

"I may not have all the details, but you're already causing us trouble in spades, kid."

One of the mafiosi quietly took out his gun, never taking his eyes off the boy, and pointed the business end at him.

"What's in that sack? Take it out slowly, and I mean *slowly*, so we can see it."

He apparently suspected it was a bomb or a gun.

To Lester, though, who was terrified he was about to be killed, this was far too naïve and passive.

He staggered to his feet and lunged at the arm of the man who'd just drawn his gun.

"Gimme that, you goddamn—!"

"Wha—?!"

The man flinched at Lester's strength, which was beyond what he'd anticipated, and Lester snatched his loaded gun away.

Before the surrounding mafiosi could take him to task for it...

Before the boy could reach into the sack...

Before even Lester himself understood what he was doing...

Without a moment's hesitation, he'd squeezed the trigger, and a bullet sank into human flesh.

However, the one who'd taken that bullet wasn't the young boy.

It was the back of an abrupt visitor who'd jumped down from the top of the stairs to shield him.

"You..."

Mark had been knocked down by the sudden impact, and he was completely confused.

He was staring at the face of the immortal monster he'd been running from.

"Hi there, you okay? That was a close one, huh?"

Elmer was wearing a relieved smile, but blood from his stomach was trickling from his lips, and more blood was coming from his back.

"A close one... For you! That's just..."

After he said it, the boy remembered exactly what sort of being the man was.

“...Guess it doesn’t hurt?”

“No, it hurts like crazy. Also, maybe check your right hand.”

“Huh...?”

When he checked, he saw that the ice pick in his right hand was embedded into Elmer’s thigh. It must have happened when they fell.

“Augh! I-I’m sorry!”

“Oh, no, no worries—it was my fault.”

And then—as if nothing had happened, the young man pulled out the ice pick and stood up easily. Even with a bullet in his back, he was smiling.

Lester and the mafia men gulped at the eerie sight, but—

—the scene that played out afterward was even more unsettling.

As if it were defying time and gravity, the blood from Elmer’s back and leg crawled back up to his wounds. It moved as if each drop had a will of its own, returning to the places from which it had come.

As they watched the *squirming, writhing* red procession, the mafiosi looked at one another, exchanging anxious whispers:

(“Hey, this is...”)

(“Yeah, it’s like the bosses...”)

(“Hey, who is this guy?”)

Lester had also frozen, and his stolen gun was quickly reclaimed by its rightful owner. It wasn’t even clear whether Lester had noticed. For a moment, he forgot the pain in his shoulder, and one word fell from his trembling lips.

“I...immortal...?”

The monster had appeared out of nowhere and taken over the scene.

He didn't even check to make sure his wounds had fully closed. He just smiled, cheerfully and sincerely.

"Ah, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to disturb you. It sort of... Oh, are you okay? Really?"

Once again, Elmer tried to make sure Mark was all right, but the boy brusquely shook his hand off.

"Stop it!" Mark snapped. He refused to look at Elmer, his voice choked with tears. "Why... Why are you—?! You show up out of nowhere... This isn't even your problem... I'm trying to die, and you... Why... Why are you trying to save somebody like me?!"

"For fun."

Elmer gave a startlingly simple answer, and Mark shot him a ferocious glare.

"Don't give me that shit! You... You shouldn't help me! I'm not worth it!"

"You don't get to decide whether you're worth it—you must know that, right? What a funny thing to say."

Elmer looked genuinely mystified, and Mark shook his head, shouting at him.

"Shut up! I... He was innocent, but I..." As the confession almost left his mouth, Mark realized he was more flustered than he'd imagined.

How stupid am I? This guy doesn't know my past or who I really am.

My past...or what I've done...

That thought almost plunged him into self-loathing again, but—

"Oh, right, right! About that!" The moment he heard the word *innocent*, Elmer clapped his hands in realization. "'Lester' must be

him over there, right? Oh yeah, he really does! I see, I see. Everything is coming together now.”

“Huh...?”

“What...?”

Mark, who didn’t follow the change of subject, and Lester, who was suddenly hearing his own name, spoke at the exact same time.

Smiling, Elmer took one step down the stairs, then gave Lester a long look, examining him from head to toe.

“Yeah, you’re right. Even his clothes are from the same manufacturer.”

“Uh... What? What...about...me...? Ow!” Remembering the pain in his shoulder, Lester groaned.

“Are you okay? Well, you won’t die from that, so don’t worry about it,” Elmer told him, then spun to face the other direction and turned a breezy smile on Mark. “Now I’m positive!”

“A-about what...?”

Elmer was completely failing to read the room, and Mark unwittingly went along with his conversation, nearly forgetting his own reason for coming here.

The immortal monster grinned with even greater amusement—and then he said it.

“I know why you *stabbed* me the other day!”

“...Huh?”

“It was raining cats and dogs, after all. We have similar features, we’re about the same height, and the clothes he’s wearing are just like the ones I had on a little while ago! In a downpour like that, no wonder you thought I was Lester and stabbed me!”



Inside the abandoned building beside Grand Central Station

“In my quest for revenge on Paula’s killers, I’ve been looking for the last one.”

“.....”

After Smith’s long, long soliloquy ended, Nico and the others frowned and fell silent.

Graham and Maria had stopped listening partway through, wandered away, and started betting on whether it was possible to cut a wrench with a Japanese katana.

Graham seemed to have realized Smith had cribbed his story from Mark, while Maria hadn’t been interested in the first place.

“Well? Any other questions?”

“I see... You’re right; Carl told me what the men who’d been killed had in common.”

“Did he?”

“He said the victims might have had a particular reason for connecting with the Gandor Family.” For a little while, he seemed to mull over the information—but then Nico quietly shook his head and, with eyes that were as sharp as ever, passed judgment on Smith. “But it doesn’t matter why you did it. It’s a fact that you killed Gandor men, and I can’t just let you off the hook for that. First, Tick can determine whether that story you told me is true.”

He must have sensed there was a lie somewhere in the tale. Smith had said Paula was like an older sister to him, but there really hadn’t been any love or grief apparent in those words.

For now, Nico was about to signal his men to confiscate the concealed guns in the other man’s coat.

But then, with a whistling noise, something cut through the air, and a mighty crash echoed through the building.

Graham's wrench had passed between Smith and Nico's group and buried itself in the wall beside them.

"...Itching for trouble again today, Graham?" Nico asked, irritated.

Graham spun around and around, grinning with delight, putting himself between them and Smith.

"Sorry, but I owe Smith for letting me take his guns apart. I can't just hand him over to you. After all, I'm already the enemy of the world. Being the enemy of the Gandors won't bother me one bit."

"Can't say I'm surprised... What if he's Ice Pick Thompson, the way he was talking? Will you still take his side?"

"I've been sworn brothers with a murderer for a long time. And he's a total bastard who kills people for fun."

Graham's reply sounded like nothing more than a joke, and the mafiosi began to shift their aim toward him, but then—

"I see... Lower your guns, men."

"Nico?! But..."

"This guy already fired his roscoes in here earlier. The area's gonna be crawling with cops trying to find where the shots came from. We don't need to help them out."

"So then it's my turn, huh, amigo?!"

Maria had apparently tuned back in; she came running over, eyes shining.

Smiling without humor, Nico shook his head, then took a step forward to challenge Smith himself.

Smith looked at the other man, then lowered his guns temporarily.

“...Kid Graham, is that Nico fellow tough?” Smith asked Graham.

“I’ve fought him a few times.”

“And how’d it go?”

Graham yanked his wrench out of the wall, flashed a thumbs-up, and winked. “One win, six losses!”

“Truly bleak odds.”

“Against a machine gun, though, he ain’t so tough. When they filled him with lead before, he almost died. If you count me in, we’ll have a three-way deadlock!”

“It sounds as if you’re trying to say he *could* win against a machine gun. Hell, if he’s still alive and kicking after an encounter with one, he’s a force to be reckoned with.”

Smiling in amazement, Smith nodded quietly.

“Still... To a lunatic like me, that sounds like a decent gamble.”

Watching Maria, who’d ignored Nico’s attempt to stop her and was beginning to draw her katana, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Graham was also grinning, but then a sudden question occurred to him.

“I wanna ask you something, in case we die,” he said over his shoulder.

“What?”

“Elmer said something to you a minute ago, right? What did he say?”

“Oh, that was...”

“Your name’s Smith, right? You’re, uh— What’s the best way to put this? You’re a good guy.”

“—What?”

"I can always tell when people are faking their smiles. A minute ago, when you said you'd killed Mark and smiled—that one was fake, wasn't it? I bet either you didn't kill him, or you're sad that you did it."

"..."

"Either way, you're a good guy. I just wanted to let you know."

Remembering that conversation, Smith looked down and smiled thinly.

"I'm a good guy, am I? That fellow's pretty insane, too."

"What was that?"

"...If we survive, I'll tell you."

The threads of tension in the abandoned building all snapped taut.

Although Nico had stopped them, his men were poised to draw and fire at any moment.

Someone was going to die—

"——.....!"

Nico had sharpened his senses, and his ears picked up on a change outside.

"....."

"What's the matter, Nico?" one of his subordinates asked.

When Nico quietly replied, there was no longer any tension in his voice. "We're pulling out, men."

"Huh? What do you mean, amigo?"

"Nico?"

Nico had relaxed his stance, and all the other Gandors with him looked completely bewildered—but when they followed his gaze toward the door of the abandoned building, they understood.

Shaft was there, leaning against the wall, panting for breath—
—and behind him, the ne’er-do-wells appeared one after another,
until there was a crowd of about twenty of them.

“Aaah... For crying out loud! Getting everybody together at this
hour— That was not easy, Mr. Graham!”

There was no telling how much running around he’d done, but
Shaft’s face was so exhausted he looked ready to drop. Even then, he
said what he needed to say clearly.

“I also called up the Millionaires’ Row crew, so they’ll be here soon.”

Shaft flashed a thumbs-up and a weak smile, and Graham’s mind was
completely boggled.

“Hey, whoa, you called in too many. Are you actually planning to
take on the world? ...Damn, were you the real enemy of the world all
along? What now? Can I actually stop you if you go off the rails,
Shaft...? What the heck are you planning to do with all these people?
Don’t do anything rash; you’ll make your friends and family cry! And
I’ll cry first!”

“I called them in so we could gang up and thrash you for waltzing
into a fight with the Gandors, Mr. Graham... Wait, uh, huh?”

Seeing Nico walking toward him, Shaft instinctively stepped out of
the way.

Maria called after Nico, sounding bored.

“Aw, we’re not doing this? I really wouldn’t mind cutting up all these
people, amigo.”

“With numbers like that, it’s not a fight or an inquiry anymore. It’s a
war.”

“You and I could win easy, though.”

“I told you already. If it was just me, that’d be one thing, but the bosses haven’t given me the right to risk you—and I don’t have the authority to massacre these kids without permission.”

At the sharpness in the man’s voice, the town delinquents tensed up. Still, not a single one took to his heels. Perhaps Graham’s presence made them feel safer.

Nico seemed to be on his way out of the building, but just before he left, he paused and turned to face Smith, who’d bent over to pick up his hat.

“Let me ask you one last question.”

“...What?”

“Even if the business about you being Ice Pick Thompson is applesauce...”

“.....”

Dammit. What, it’s obvious?

Smith inwardly clicked his tongue, and the expression on his face was very mixed.

“The one who killed Lisha...,” Nico calmly went on. “It really wasn’t you?”

“Yeah. I swear by my lunacy, and what little normal brain I have left: *If nothing else*, that is true.”

“In that case—who did kill her?”

“Well, it was the last target of my revenge. Naturally.”

Smith smiled in a self-deprecating way, then gave the name of the young reporter Mark had told him.

And when Nico heard that name—



In the basement of the jazz hall Coraggioso

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m looking for an old man named Szilard. Along the way, I’ve been checking into this and that, and I heard this guy Lester might have had a connection to him, so I wanted to track him down. Then, when I was hanging around in the rain behind that paper’s office—not the *Daily Days*—I got stabbed out of nowhere. Gave me a start, let me tell you, and then as soon as the kid got a good look at me, he suddenly seemed shocked and said, ‘No... It’s not him?’ Then he ran off.”

Elmer’s monologue was outlining what had happened, but it wasn’t clear whether the people around him were listening. They just stared at him, looking stunned. The only active listener was Tick, the torture specialist, but it was hard to tell how much of the story he actually understood.

“After that, I went around looking for him, and when I found him, there he was, about to jump off a bridge and kill himself. It was my turn to be shocked that time. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Suddenly, he stopped laughing and whispered in Mark’s ear.

“By the way, is it bad if the people here find out you’re Ice Pick Thompson? If it is, I’ll skate around that somehow.”

“...No, it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

It was possible the boy hadn’t completely absorbed the situation. He quietly shook his head, looking exhausted, and nearly sank to his knees on the spot, but—

—when he heard Lester’s voice, a switch flipped in his mind again.

“Y-you!” Lester was shouting. “You’re immortal?! J-ju...just like Master Szilard!”

“Mm-hmm, that’s right. You really do know old Szilard.”

“P-please, I’ll do anything, anything you say! Anything, *sir*! I’ll do absolutely anything, you’ll see! P-please, just give it to me—give me the liquor of immortality, too...!”

Lester was on his knees, hands clasped in desperate supplication, even something akin to prayer.

The moment Mark heard it—

—a black vortex began churning in his heart.

Lester’s actions disgusted him, and in less than a second, his loathing turned to pure hatred.

“...That much? You want *this* that much?” Mark asked with fury in his voice.

“...What?”

When Lester looked his way—the boy had just taken a small bottle out of the paper parcel he was holding.

At first, Lester didn’t know what it was...

...but then, when he saw the colored liquid rippling in the bottle, his brain began screaming all at once.

“It can’t be! *Don’t tell me that’s—?!*”

“When Mom was alive...she buried this bottle in Dad’s grave. I wondered why she’d do a thing like that. This really is...what you people were looking for, isn’t it?”

“I knew it! It actually is the failed liquor, then?! Mark—Mark, my dear boy... Give me, give that to me. It should have belonged to all of us equally.”

“Is that why you killed my mother?”

“...! N-no! It’s her fault, Paula’s fault! You saw that man’s wounds heal up just now, didn’t you?! We can do it, too; we can escape

death! It's the dream of mankind! You can't just hoard it for yourself!"

"The dream...of mankind?"

Lester's scream was approaching incoherence, but the boy's response was a calm murmur—in inverse proportion to the hatred in his heart, which was rising to levels he never thought possible.

"So petty... *You're saying you killed my mom over a lousy dream?*" Mark slowly lifted his head and quietly raised the bottle.

"H-hey! Wait! What are you going to do?! I-if you want money, I'll give you as much as you want! Just wait—"

"I didn't bring this here so I could drink it, or to give it to you."

Mark's arm stopped at its highest point. His expression was complicated, a blend of sorrowful and murderous—

—and in the next moment, that expression vanished entirely, replaced by the mask of a cold-blooded killer.

"I brought it so I could smash it in front of you."

"Stop it, you dirty son of a whooooooooore!"

With the speed and wild abandon of an animal, Lester launched himself off the floor.

Mark didn't let that opportunity escape him. This was exactly what he'd expected.

Before anyone could stop him—as Lester leaped at him, he thrust out his right hand to counter him.

Of course, that hand still held the ice pick.

The attack struck true, but it still wasn't enough to kill Lester's drive toward immortality.

Even as the spike sank into Lester's throat, he clutched at Mark's clothes and scrabbled for the end of his left arm like a man scaling a sheer cliff.

Mark yanked his weapon out of the man's throat, then stabbed him in the chest, the torso, and the legs, over and over.

Even that didn't stop Lester's charge. In just a few seconds, before Mark had time to shatter it, he wrenched the small bottle from him, then kicked the boy away.

There were multiple growing bloodstains on Lester's clothes, and blood spurted from his throat in time with his pulse. Kicking Mark down had brought him to the floor as well, but he was beyond paying attention to his own condition.

In this moment, his world was empty of everything, even himself. All that was there was his prize, the failed liquor of immortality, floating by itself in space.



It wouldn't let him escape old age, but at least the failed liquor would heal any other damage he took.

With a monstrous expression, Lester clawed the cork out of the bottle with his fingernails. The mafia men frowned, watching him.

"That wouldn't be the liquor of immortality, would it?"

As Elmer watched the man on the floor open the bottle, the smile vanished from his face.

"Um. Because if it is, I wouldn't drink it now..."

Elmer made a perfunctory attempt to stop him, but Lester knocked his hands away—"Out of my way!"—and chugged the contents of the bottle without coming up for air.

He swallowed with as much force as he could, washing down both the elixir and the blood filling his throat.

Ha, ha-ha, I did it! I drank it!

Overcome with emotion, Lester tried to shout the words, but—

"Bah, va-ba, dibbi...drugghi...ib...?"

—air whistled from his throat, and he wasn't able to properly convert it into speech.

"...? Ah...gahk..."

As his mind grew calmer, Lester finally experienced the vicious pain that was still racking his body.

"AAaaaaaAaaaaah! VaaAAaaahaaaaAH!"

The bleeding in his throat had stopped.

However—although no more blood flowed out, for some reason, his wounds weren't healing. Not only that, but the blood he'd lost wasn't returning to his body the way it had gone back to Elmer's a few moments ago.

Lester writhed on the floor in confusion.

Looking down at him, Elmer gave a sigh that sounded a little sad and shook his head. "I told you drinking it was a bad idea, remember?"

"Gwah...! GaaaaaAAH! ...?!"

"The elixir of immortality *only makes you immortal. It doesn't heal wounds.*"

Even as the man screamed, his throat and abdomen riddled with deep holes, Elmer was calm.

He was so calm, in fact, that Mark and the watching mafiosi were unsettled by it.

"Same with certain diseases: It stops them from progressing further, but it won't cure them. If you're sick or injured when you drink it, the liquor recognizes the state your body is in right then as the state it should revert to."

"...!"

"Well, it looks like it starts to get a little more flexible after several years, but healing wounds like yours... That's probably going to take an astronomical amount of time. I think you've got a better chance of something breaking in your mind until you can't feel it anymore."

It wasn't clear how much of Elmer's long speech had gotten through to Lester. The pain was enough to make someone black out, but he wasn't even allowed to lose consciousness from blood loss. He just kept screaming.

What did Mark think as he watched his mother's killer? He stood there, his face expressionless. Elmer spoke to him in a whisper.

"Are you satisfied now? Or can you still not stand to have him survive, even if he's like that?"

“...How did you know I was here?” Mark murmured, although he didn’t answer the question, and the look on his face didn’t change.

“*Know* isn’t really the word... This kid named Shaft asked me to help him get all his friends together, and while I was busy with that, I saw you walking in the rain. You looked dead serious. Then Shaft told me I should go after you and he’d manage with everything at the building, so I took him up on it and followed you... After a little while, you went in here, and chaos broke out,” Elmer explained matter-of-factly. “It’s scary what can happen by coincidence, but it’s fun in its own way.” He smiled. “I really was planning to go into that abandoned building, but I sure am glad I listened to Shaft. If you were slightly older and a girl, he might have been Cupid. Oh well.”

“Abandoned building...?”

Elmer had told him the truth, adding a few casual jokes, but Mark didn’t know about Graham’s situation, so he didn’t really understand the substance of what was said.

The same was true of the surrounding mafia men.

“Hey, you two... Don’t move.”

“I dunno what’s your beef with this reporter, but we can’t just let a brat with an ice pick walk... Not to mention the immortal fella over there. You’re gonna stay here until the bosses get back.”

Bewildered as they were, they slowly closed in on Mark and Elmer.

However—several sets of footsteps echoed from upstairs, and the tension rose again.

“N-Nico!”

Nico, Maria, and the rest were back.

“...What’s going on here?”

Seeing a boy holding a bloody ice pick, Nico quietly narrowed his eyes, but when he spotted Lester groaning on the ground, he exhaled in realization.

“Mark... Are you Mark Wilmens?”

“...? How do you know that name?”

“Lisha talked about you a lot. She said she had a sort of little brother, someone she was taking care of. Well, that he was taking care of her.”

“She did...?”

Startled, the boy’s expression turned childlike again, and Nico quietly rephrased his question.

“So what about it? Are you Mark?”

“Mark was... Mark Wilmens was just killed by a hitman. He’s dead.” The boy lowered his eyes, intimidated, but he didn’t run. “I’m...the killer...Ice Pick Thomp—”

“Yeah, you don’t have to finish that sentence.”

“...?”

“Ice Pick Thompson, huh...? *I just had a chat with him.*”

Smiling faintly, Nico advanced to the middle of the room. One of the Family’s men went over to him and filled him in on what had happened in a whisper.

For a little while, Nico listened quietly. Then he looked down at Lester and muttered, “Huh... So he’s like the bosses now, eh?”

As Lester thrashed around, Nico’s foot stomped down hard on his left hand.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a dull noise, the bones in his fingers snapped, and a wheezy scream leaked out of the holes in his throat.

As Nico watched, though, the grotesquely twisted fingers began to revert to their former shape.

“Tick.”

“Yeees?” Tick responded to his name, scissors snicking.

Nico’s expression was cold as ice. “You can take today off after all,” he quietly said.

“Huh?”

Tick looked puzzled, and the executive fighter’s voice held a variety of suppressed emotions as he went on.

“I’ll take care of this guy...personally.”

“You will, Nico?”

“Yeah. If nothing I do can kill him—then even an amateur like me can relax...and have a real *party* with this. You follow?”

Elmer, who’d overheard that conversation, sighed quietly. Then he kneeled beside Lester, who was groaning in pain, and murmured to him with a soft smile.

“Listen, I’ve thought of one way you can be happy.”

“...? —? —??”

“If dying now would make you happier... If you’d be able to die smiling this way...then I could *eat* you with my hand, right now... Only if it would let you die happy, though.”

Elmer’s words must have made him realize what was about to happen to him.

Lester shook his head, as though rejecting something—

—and a wordless scream whistled from the holes the ice pick had put in his throat.

“I see... That’s too bad.”

Elmer sounded a little sad. Then he promptly smiled again and nodded reassuringly.

“In that case, *when you change your mind several years from now...I’ll come back again.*

“Maybe I’ll have found a way to get rid of your pain by then, and the wounds of the people you hurt may have healed.”



Digression B

1932 A certain day of a certain month The speakeasy Alveare

“Sure, we can say we’ll become money, but how do we do it?”

“What if we made clothes out of coins?”

“I see...! True, if you put lots of coins in layers, they might even stop bullets! Okay, Miria! Let’s go get all the bills we’ve got and exchange them for coins!”

“Okay, Isaac! Won’t they be heavy, though?”

“Of course they’ll be heavy! They’re protecting our lives, so they may even weigh more than us! But there’s no way around it! Money outweighs life!”

“Yes, Money Wars!”

Watching the pair converse as they always did, Firo sighed again.

“Are you two still goin’ on about that?” All the ice had melted in his glass, so the young camorrista started rinsing it out as he spoke. “Say you block Ice Pick Thompson’s attack. What’re you gonna do afterward?”

“What are we going to do? ...What *are* we going to do, Miria?”

“Settle his hash?”

“But we don’t know if he’s a good person or not yet.”

“Ooh, that’s a tough one!”

The pair had begun worrying about something very basic, and Firo watched them, wide-eyed.

“Whoa, come on. First, you can’t actually settle his hash, and second, he’s a killer, remember? There’s no way he’s a good person.”

“You can kill people and still be good.”

“Yes, Jacuzzi’s a really good person!”

“Who? What the hell kinda name is that?”

Firo was perplexed by the sudden name, but instead of answering, Isaac and Miria smiled brightly at him.

“Even you, Firo. You may be mafi—uh, Camorra, and you may be breaking Prohibition, but you’re a good guy, too!”

“Yes, you’re all good people!”

“Cut that out. If everybody starts thinking fellas like us are ‘actually good people,’ it’s not gonna end well.” With a genuinely reluctant smile, Firo warned the pair off, but—

“Hey, don’t be so modest! At first, we thought you were bad guys ourselves! We figured nobody could blame us if we stole your money, but then we met you and you turned out to be really good people!”

“Yes, and you saved Ennis! So now you’re an even better person!”

“Hold it—did you just say something nuts about stealing from us?” Firo hastily asked; he definitely couldn’t let that slide.

However, without looking the least bit guilty, Isaac and Miria thumped him on the shoulders.

“Don’t worry about it; that’s all in the past! Instead of stealing your money, we’re stealing your time, Firo!”

“Yes, money is time!”

“.....”

Maybe I really shoulda let that one slide.

It would be bad if that story ballooned and the other executives heard it, so Firo politely hustled Isaac and Miria out of the speakeasy. Then he resumed his seat at the counter and heaved a big sigh.

“I’m a good person, huh?”

As he murmured, he mentally sized himself up against Ice Pick Thompson.

Firo had killed a man before, too.

That man had been Szilard Quates, the lowest scum there was, and he'd killed many times more people than Ice Pick Thompson—but Firo had taken his life with his own hand. On that point, maybe there wasn't much difference between himself and the other killer.

Killers probably didn't need salvation. Even Firo knew that.

By the same token, he understood there *was* no perfect salvation for him, since he'd voluntarily joined the Camorra in making a living breaking the law.

In a way, one could say being punished for those crimes was its own form of salvation.

No doubt there were some who'd say no punishment was severe enough for a criminal who'd committed serial murders.

But what if Isaac and Miria were right about him? What if he wasn't a total villain?

What if they hadn't been indiscriminate killings? What if he'd acted with some goal in mind?

To look at an extreme case, killing was allowed in war. What if this was the same? What if anyone would condone these murders once they heard the whole story?

Firo mentally shrugged.

Well, I doubt the streetwalker would have had anything to do with that. Since he killed her, I bet that's not the case.

Unaware of the truth, Firo kept on thinking.

If they never managed to catch Ice Pick Thompson, would he—or possibly she—keep on killing people without consequences? Would

the killer take perverse delight in their luck, murdering freely without ever getting caught?

Or if there really was a reason behind the murders, and the killer didn't receive the salvation of punishment, would Ice Pick Thompson be able to bear the weight of his own crimes?

Even if the killer was a good person, and his victims were bad people—still, he probably didn't need salvation.

No matter the reason, murder was murder.

Whether or not it was premeditated, having a body count meant rejecting salvation.

Naturally, Firo didn't need total redemption after having killed Szilard, either. He'd justified his actions in his own mind, and he hoped to marry the girl he'd fallen in love with. If people said that made him even worse than a murderer, well, that's just how it had to be.

But at the very least, he wanted to limit all the punishment to himself.

Imagining his roommate, the woman he loved, Firo quietly closed his eyes.

Just then, a small figure came to stand beside him.

"Did what Isaac and Miria said back there get to you? Do you think you're not a good person?"

"Czes."

"Don't worry about it, Firo. After all, you're going to be alive for a long time. There's no point worrying about whether everything's 'good' or 'bad.'" Czes's advice sounded more jaded than precocious.

"Up until a few years ago, bars were perfectly legal here. Now, though, it's prohibited by law. Not many countries or eras have made

murder legal, but there's no telling what may happen in the future. And then there's war, of course."

"....."

"All we immortals can do is reach an understanding with the ages in which we live. Times change. Countries change. The boundary between 'good' and 'bad' is practically meaningless."

The experienced immortal Czes delivered a lecture to the much younger Firo.

"In that sense, Isaac and Miria were right about humans being unable to beat time... Aging and natural life spans aside."

Czes's smile seemed vaguely resigned. As he looked him, Firo got the feeling he should say something, but he realized he would have to grow before he would know what it was.

He thought it might have to do with the distance Czes kept between himself and the rest of them, and he wasn't sure whether he should continue the conversation—but just then, Czes seemed to remember something.

"Oh, but there was one strange person among the immortals."

"Yeah?"

"What I just told you, I actually heard from someone else. He said that once we were immortal, we'd end up living in all different times and places, so we'd have to reach an understanding with those eras..."

As he reminisced about the past, Czes was visualizing the faces and words of the alchemists who'd become immortal along with him.

"Then someone else laughed and said, 'It doesn't matter. I won't obey the era or the country. Wherever, whenever you are, people's smiles are the same. So they're the only rule I'll follow. They're the law, as far as I'm concerned.' He wasn't embarrassed at all."

That peculiar alchemist had been prepared to die for another person's smile since before he was immortal. Remembering him, Czes murmured with a smile as real as they come.

"Elmer was unsettling in some ways, but still... I wonder where he is and what he's doing now."



EPILOGUE

The living and
the dead **share** the world



EPILOGUE: The living and the dead share the world

He remembered what his mother had said to him two years ago, in front of his father's grave.

"Listen, if... If somebody kidnaps you and asks you where something is—tell them about this place, right away. Before they can do anything to you."

She'd buried a box with some sort of bottle in it in front of his father's grave, and then she'd hugged him very, very tightly.

"I thought about giving you some to drink, but...that's not my choice to make. I don't even know whether you'll end up liking this world."

He hadn't been able to understand what his mother was saying, and he just kept listening silently.

"So just...live strong, Mark. Later on, if you find out everything, remember this place then, too. When the time comes, you think about what to do with it and decide for yourself."

Her warmth had been very gentle, and he could still remember her smile vividly.

A few days after that, his mother was discovered as a mutilated corpse...

...and the boy had lost the ability to smile the way she had.



"That was lucky, huh?! They let us go without a scratch."

It was the morning after everything had ended.

Elmer, who'd been released from the Gandors' office unscathed, was talking to Mark, who'd left along with him.

“So how was it? Now that your revenge is complete, do you think you’ll be able to smile sincerely?”

“.....”

Mark glared wordlessly at the immortal monster, who was being tactless, as usual.

“Well, I guess that’s not a question that comes with an easy answer, is it? I’m sorry.”

“.....”

Wordlessly, Mark started walking, and Elmer followed him, smiling.

“Revenge isn’t something you do for the person who died, you know. You do it to resolve whatever’s in your own heart that isn’t satisfied so that you can move forward. So that you can live. A lot of people plan to die once they’ve had their revenge, but I think even there, it’s something they do so they can die with closure.”

“.....”

“You’ve gotten your revenge and moved forward. You have the right to be happy now. I don’t know whether what you did was right or wrong, *and I don’t actually care.*”

The immortal monster didn’t applaud the things the boy had done, nor did he condemn them. He simply kept talking in his matter-of-fact way.

“Are you wondering whether you should atone for your crimes?”

“.....”

“If that will satisfy you and let you smile at the end, go ahead. If you regret it, just think of a way to start over. You could also let the relatives of the victims take revenge on you. Whatever gives you peace of mind.”

Elmer kept rambling on insensitively, but even Mark could tell there wasn't a shred of malice in what he said.

That was why instead of running, the boy kept listening to what he had to say.

"You can think about it until you're satisfied. There's absolutely no reason to give up. Remember one thing, though."

"....."

"I will never deny your right to be happy, even if the rest of the world does. Don't forget there's somebody out there who thinks that, too."

Mark stopped in his tracks, looked at Elmer steadily, and replied with blunt honesty.

"I...think you're nuts for saying all that without even blinking...and frankly, you scare me. I'd rather not say this, but I get the feeling that with eternal life, a guy like you could destroy the world someday."

"Oh, don't let that bother you. I think that's a normal reaction. My old friend always says people should be way more afraid of me with good intentions than of God with bad intentions! Ah-ha-ha! Pretty mean, huh?!"

Saying that was all he'd had to tell him, Elmer waved and started off, but—

—when Mark called after him, Elmer turned back toward him for a moment.

"That said..., " Mark murmured. "Thanks. For...everything. I mean it."

For just a moment, he seemed to smile faintly.

And for Elmer, that was enough.



Night The underground bar Jane Doe

That evening, having completed his report to the president, Carl stopped in at the speakeasy where he'd heard Graham's group would be.

In the end, Carl had made contact with the group again, then gone to the Gandors' establishment. There, he'd managed to get practically the whole story.

Ultimately...Lester didn't get out of the city.

Carl, who'd assumed Lester would promptly skip town, thought about that on his own.

Why had Lester gone to the Gandor Family instead of making a run for it? He'd never wanted an eventful life.

Carl had asked the president about it, and he had thought for a while behind his documents.

"...His desires as a murderer must have been greater than his ordinary fear of death," he'd said, stating his own conjecture in his usual calm voice.

In that case...maybe he wanted to steer clear of incidents...because deep down, he didn't want to be reunited with the killer in himself.

...Or maybe I'm thinking too kindly of him.

Feeling pity for his former colleague, he went down the stairs that led underground, and this time, he thought about Mark.

If it were possible, he'd wanted to adopt the kid. He'd suggested it to Mark at the Gandors' office, but—

"Thank you...but Mark Wilmens is already dead. You can't formally adopt somebody who's dead, you know?" he'd said, shaking his head.

I wonder what he's going to do now. Will he leave town?

Or is he planning to turn himself in? I hear a shady department at the Bureau of Investigation sticks their oar in when the liquor of immortality is involved...

Either way, killing people must have been a painful experience for a boy.

A mere child had killed people as if it was nothing. Maybe he'd done it for revenge, but that didn't change the fact that he'd become a murderer.

Even though his motive was nearly the polar opposite of Lester's...

Maybe nobody was born a murderer. Maybe absolutely anyone was fundamentally capable of it. In that case, didn't everyone have to go through a fight with themselves to stay human among all the killers?

This incident was likely to end without the criminal's capture, and Carl was thinking of wrapping up his articles on it that way. Still, he didn't want to see Mark as a failure who'd lost the battle with himself.

Well...even if I want to find out for sure, I doubt I'll ever see him again.

Feeling a different sort of pity than the kind he'd felt for Lester, Carl opened the door of the speakeasy.

He saw a boy.

"Let me tell you a fun, fun story! Smith picked up an underling! How 'bout that!"

"He says he's an apprentice, not an underling."

"I see... If he's an apprentice, then Smith'll have to teach him something. Come to think of it, I've spent the last few days having the sun and the world teach me my place! ...Wait, does that make me their apprentice? Is this heat a trial set for me by my teachers?! We're in trouble, Shaft; I haven't practiced or prepared at all."

“Just flunk and let the world turn its back on you, all right?”

Ignoring Graham and Shaft, who were having one of their usual conversations, a tall man in a long coat was sitting in a corner of the speakeasy. Beside him sat a small figure whose cap was pulled down low.

“Hey, apprentice.”

“Yes, Mr. Smith?”

“...Call me Teacher.”

“Yes, Teacher.”

The boy responded calmly—Carl definitely recognized him.

Shaft hadn’t noticed Carl, but his next comment provided further proof.

“‘A nameless boy who’s lost his memory’? Really? It’s clear as day that’s Mar— Mmfggle.”

“Don’t be a rube!”

Covering Shaft’s mouth with the end of his wrench, Graham lectured him in a whisper.

“Listen, Shaft. Ice Pick Thompson’s real identity is our secret and nobody else’s. Got it?”

“...Yeah, yeah. Mr. Graham, I swear to you, *I won’t even tell my own father.*”

Having overheard their conversation, Carl waited until Smith left his seat, then spoke to the boy.

And the boy told him, quite simply, that he’d apprenticed himself to a hitman named Smith.

“It’s not that I want to become a hitman. Smi... Teacher said he’d take on all my crimes for me, but I can’t just forget that I killed people. For better or for worse.”

He said Smith had accepted that without comment; apparently, he was equally devoted to the “death” of Mark.

“And so...I want to follow my teacher and the crimes he’s taken on for me and see the consequences through.”

“Are you saying you’ll eventually take the punishment in his place?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s only that I can’t get them out of my head, but...”

Looking down for a moment, Mark remembered his mother’s smile—and as he answered, he tried to emulate it as best he could.

“I’m alive thanks to my mom and a lot of luck. I want to see what happens in this life...as far into the future as I can.”

For a little while, Carl tried to say something, but then he looked at that smile and shook his head, giving up.

“If you get tired of watching it, stop by the *Daily Days* anytime.”

The information broker wondered if the link in his mind between his departed daughter and this boy made him a hypocrite—but he smiled anyway.

“I’ll teach you as much as you want about the basics of being a reporter.”



A girl was crying by the side of the road. Perhaps she’d gotten lost.

The passersby were concerned about her, but the train had signaled that it was about to depart, and they all boarded hastily.

However, one man stopped and walked right over to the girl instead.

The train doors shut.

He'd wasted the cost of his ticket, and yet he crouched down, putting himself on eye level with the girl to reassure her—and smiled at her gently.

“Hi there, it's good to meet you! You don't have to stop crying, but for now, smile! Go on and smile!”



AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Ryohgo Narita.

I don't know when you might be reading this. At the time that I'm writing this, Japan is on the road to recovery. Fortunately, the area where I live was unhurt by the earthquake, but at a time when so many relatives, acquaintances, and readers are suffering, it's hard for me to even know how to offer condolences to my own extended family. Everyone says, "They don't want to hear your empty encouragement," while on the other hand, I've also heard directly from those affected, saying, "I just want a word of comfort." So I spend these days thinking long and hard about what words I can prepare for others.

But if you're reading this afterword, then I choose to believe you've regained enough of an ordinary life that you're able to read a book, at least. I hope this volume will help lead you to the next thing in that process. When I write books, I hope they'll be idle entertainment, something you can read while eating popcorn or hold with sweaty palms. Times might be hard right now, but I'll keep writing in the hopes that what I create is worth your idle entertainment time once you've got enough normalcy left to sit around, reading books and eating popcorn.

On a different note, this book is a little unusual, so I'll talk a bit about that.

This volume is an expanded, revised version of a *Baccano!* anime DVD bonus.

When we announced that I'd be turning the DVD bonus into a book, I got some reproachful messages. "After I spent all that money to get the DVD set...!" and so forth. To the people who felt that way, I'm really sorry!

My personal stance is that, when I take something I wrote as a DVD bonus or short story for *Dengeki Bunko MAGAZINE* and turn it into a novel, it's the same as when a movie that was shown in theaters and sold on DVD or Blu-ray is broadcast on TV, uncut. When people went to the theater to see that movie or bought the DVD, some of them probably aren't happy to see it show up on TV, even if that happens several years later. I'm well aware of this; however, it's been a few years since the DVDs were released, and there are new readers in elementary and middle school who found the series via the *DRRR!!* anime. Even if they buy the DVDs now, they won't be able to read the first-run bonus novel, and so I turned it into a book.

It goes without saying that, with DVDs, the anime footage is the main event, and the "bonus" part of the bonus novels that come with those DVDs is the fact that you can read them several years later...or that's what I think. Please do understand, though, that this is just my personal opinion; I'm not hinting at the possibility that other writers' bonus works may be turned into books. (At this point in time, there are no plans to turn any *DRRR!!* DVD bonuses into a novel, either.)

I have three remaining "seasons" planned in *Baccano!*: *1711*, *1935* (in which Smith, who made his comeback in this volume, is scheduled to appear), and *2003*, in which they settle things with the last boss. We haven't yet decided whether I'll turn the other DVD bonus into a novel at some point in there, but after those three seasons, *Baccano!* should reach a stopping point. (After that, I'll probably release standalone "side story" volumes, like *5656!* in the *Etsusa Bridge* series.) That being the case, please stick with me for just a little while longer...!

This summer, I'll release *DRRR!!*, Vol. 10, and starting in autumn, I'd like to choose either *1711*, *Vamp!*, or a follow-up to *5656!* to write next, so please support the non-*Baccano!* series as well!

*Everything from this point on is the usual thank-yous.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), and the rest of the Dengeki Bunko editorial department. To the copy editors, for whom I always cause trouble by working too slowly, every single time. To the designers, who made this book look good. To the people of ASCII Media Works, including the publicity department, the publishing department, and the marketing department.

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To everyone on the *Baccano!* anime staff, who created the opportunity for me to write this novel.

To Katsumi Enami, who managed to turn out fantastic illustrations that were new to this volume while working up a storm on various game jobs.

And to everyone who read this book.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all the people mentioned above. Thank you very much!

May 2011, Ryohgo Narita

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